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The purpose of this study was to explore how individualized education plan (IEP) teams determine least restrictive environment (LRE) and educational placement. This interview-based study asked 20 participants who have served on IEP Teams about the functioning of IEP Teams, particularly as the IEP Team determines LRE. Participants included five special education teachers, five general education teachers, five building-level administrators, and five parents of children with disabilities. Five major themes emerged from the data including: (a) student data and characteristics as deficits, (b) hierarchy of IEP Team members, (c) legal requirements as a burden, (d) lack of resources and funding, and (e) continuing and predetermination of placement. Within each theme, implications of the study are discussed, and recommendations for practice and additional research are presented.

HOW INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN TEAM MEMBERS
DETERMINE LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT
AND EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT

by

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To all of the students I have had the honor to teach and interact with over the years.
I have learned far more from you than you could ever learn from me.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Determining where students with disabilities should be educated has been an ongoing issue for decades. It is mandatory that schools follow the policies set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act¹ (IDEA). This includes the creation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) by an IEP Team, the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and the delivery of specialized education and related services. Figure 1 depicts these requirements, and the following sections include descriptions of each.

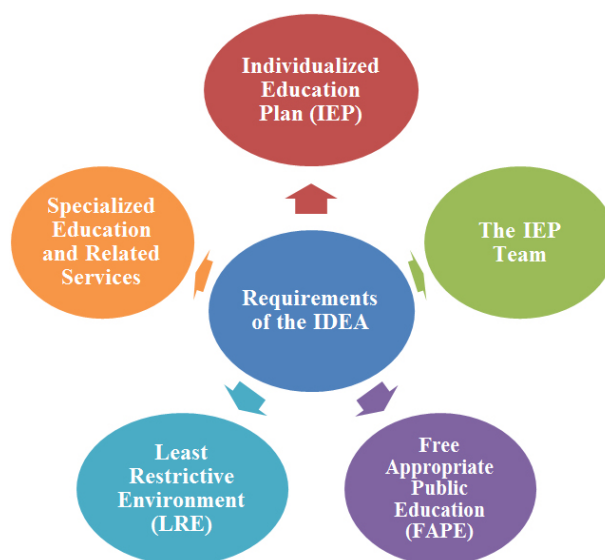


Figure 1. Requirements of the IDEA.

¹ The 1990 amendments to Public Law 94-142, P.L. 101-476, renamed the Education for All Handicapped Children of America (EAHCA) to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA includes the mandate for least restrictive environment (LRE) and a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 612 (a) (5); Sec. 300.17)

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a written plan developed to meet the special learning needs of a student with a disability (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2011). This plan should be personalized to the student and must include the student's present level of performance, annual goals, a description of services that will be implemented to help the student reach these goals, how progress will be monitored, and the length and location of the special education services. Every child with a disability who qualifies for special education or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is entitled to an IEP (McLaughlin, 2009; IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412). Figure 1.2 depicts the basic components of an IEP as required by the IDEA.

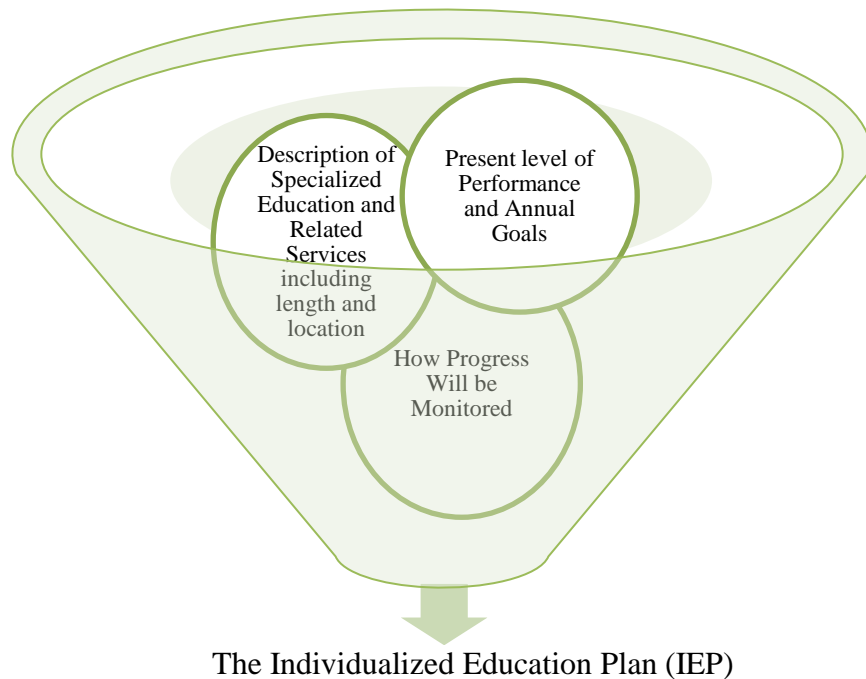


Figure 2. Basic Components of an IEP as Required by the IDEA.

By federal law the IEP Team must include the student's parent or guardian, the student (when appropriate), a general education teacher, a special education teacher², a representative of the local education agency (typically the school's principal or assistant principal), and someone who can interpret any evaluation results (Yell, 2012). These evaluation results may include teacher made assessments, psychological assessments, standardized tests, and/or academic assessments. Related service providers often attend if the child is receiving a related service. Related services include speech therapy, occupational therapy, transportation, and physical therapy (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412, Sec. 614 (d)(1)(B)).

School districts are responsible for providing a "Free Appropriate Public Education" to all students with disabilities (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 300.17). In order for a student's education to be deemed appropriate, the student must be demonstrating educational benefit (Blankenship, Boon, & Fore, 2007). This does not mean the school is responsible for maximizing the potential for all students, but students must be showing some level of progress. The IEP Team must include in the IEP how they will monitor the student's progress. This progress monitoring helps the IEP Team to determine if the education they are providing is truly appropriate.

IEP Teams are required to make decisions about how to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Least restrictive environment refers to the requirement within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with

² Special Education Teachers are also referred to as Exceptional Children's (EC) Teachers.

peers without disabilities (Yell, 2012). While this requirement persists, there is little guidance within the mandate to assist IEP Teams in making these important decisions. Fulfilling this mandate requires team members to fully understand the child's level of academic and functional performance along with what accommodations and supplementary aids s/he will need in order to access the general education curriculum (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 612 (a) (5)).

The IDEA defines special education as specially designed instruction (including adaptations and modifications) and related services provided at no extra cost to meet the student's individual and unique needs regardless of the severity of the disability (Bateman, Bright, O'Shea, O'Shea, & Algozzine, 2007, p. 24). The IEP Team determines the duration and frequency of the specialized education and related services, which they must document in a detailed service description in the student's IEP. Part of the service description must include the location of these services and if the IEP Team decides to remove the student with a disability from the general education classroom for any part of his or her school day, they must develop a least restrictive environment justification statement. In this least restrictive environment statement, the team must explain why the student with a disability cannot receive specialized education and related services in a general education with the use of supplemental aids and services.

While the IDEA does not mandate full inclusion or mainstreaming of students with disabilities into regular³ education classrooms, it does ask that students with disabilities be integrated into the typical school day with their non-disabled peers as

³ The terms regular education and general education are used interchangeably in this paper and have the same meaning. The same applies to regular education teacher and general education teacher.

much as the IEP Team deems appropriate. This places the decision-making process on the IEP Team, with the only measure of compliance being “maximum extent appropriate.” This broad guideline results in a great deal of subjectivity and differing interpretations of what is appropriate for students with disabilities, causing variance from school to school and state to state (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 300.112 through 300.118).

Educational placement decisions have not always existed, as students with disabilities have not always attended public schools nor have regulatory protections been in place to require them. In 1968, the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) conducted a study to determine how many children with handicaps⁴ lived in the United States (Weintraub, Abeson, & Braddock, 1971). This was the first report to Congress on the Education of Handicapped Children and was funded by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This study discovered that one million children with handicaps were receiving no services. These students were labeled as Priority 1 students. Five million more students with disabilities were receiving services; however, half of these students were receiving services that were inadequate to meet their needs. These two and a half million students were labeled as Priority 2 students. Money was set aside to address this issue and five policy vectors evolved into the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, which was reauthorized and re-named the Individuals

⁴ The word handicap is used here, as that was the terminology used during this particular era. Handicap is no longer accepted and was replaced by disability in the reauthorization of IDEA, 1990 (Yell, 2012). Part of this reauthorization also included “person-first” language (i.e., person with a disability as opposed to disabled person).

with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Osborne & Russo, 2007). These vectors were identification and referral, non-discriminatory assessment, free appropriate public education (FAPE), the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and least restrictive environment (LRE). Due process rights and parental involvement are required throughout all five of these policies and processes.

Congress sanctioned the concept of least restrictive environment, building on court decisions from the previous decade, with the passing of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 (Taylor, 2004). This act articulates a preference for serving students with disabilities in the regular education environment

. . . to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children in public and private institutions or other care facilities are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412)

Both the EAHCA and the IDEA are littered with interpretive language such as “satisfactorily” and “appropriate.” These concepts are open to discussion by various IEP Team members. Additionally, it is a judgment call of IEP Team members to determine the “nature and severity” of the disability, along with what constitutes the “maximum extent appropriate.”

Greater clarity exists regarding what educational placement options must be available to students with disabilities. While the IDEA requires IEP Teams to attempt to educate a child with a disability in the general education classroom, it also requires that a

continuum of settings be available (Yell, 2012). This means a school must offer regular, resource, and separate settings for students who need more specialized instruction and supports. When schools do not provide the full continuum of settings and services, students with disabilities are at risk for not receiving specialized instruction and services individualized for their needs. Not only does this violate the federal statute, but more importantly it denies a child what he or she needs in order to access the learning environment.

The continuum of special education services involves a sequence of educational placement options ranging from least restrictive to most restrictive. However, within this continuum are conflicting viewpoints. Taylor (2004) describes the least restrictive settings as being more integrated and offering the least intensive services, while the most restrictive settings are the most segregated and provide the most intensive services. Others argue that regular classes may be more restrictive depending on the nature and severity of the disability (Rueda, Gallego, & Moll, 2000).

While educators have made significant improvements since 1968 when one million children with disabilities were not receiving services, IEP Teams and service providers must still assess whether or not students with disabilities are being served appropriately. This makes the decision of determining the least restrictive environment critical for IEP Teams. Previous studies have identified where students receive instruction and special education services. However, we know little about how and why these placement decisions are determined. In fact, the functioning of IEP Teams generally is an under-researched phenomenon.

In 2012, there were 5,693,441 students in the U.S. receiving specialized education services (Institute on Disability, 2014, para. 4). Currently, there are approximately 35,562 students receiving specialized services in North Carolina, with 2,750 of these students attending school in the district where this study took place (ncpublicschools.org). These statistics, displayed in Appendix A, are disaggregated according to the specific disability category. Appendix B provides a description of each disability category.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Additional research is needed to determine how IEP Teams decide where to educate students with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to examine how IEP Teams determine the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. More specifically, the study investigated the criteria IEP Teams use to make decisions about LRE. A better understanding of how IEP Teams determine LRE will help ensure that students are receiving appropriate and individualized services along with opportunities to interact with the school community. This study asked participants who have served on IEP Teams about the functioning of IEP Teams, particularly as the IEP Team determines LRE. The following research questions guided the investigation:

- How do IEP team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when they make decisions regarding a student's individualized education plan?
- How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?

- How do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?
- What outside factors and influences (if any) do IEP Team members consider when they determine LRE and Educational Placement?

Significance of Study

In research by Swedeen (2009), students with disabilities reported higher expectations for themselves and more long-term goals after spending more time with non-disabled peers. Swedeen theorizes that when experiences and opportunities are expanded through inclusive schooling, this can also result in a shifting of community expectations over time. Educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom can also have a positive impact on their non-disabled peers. Carter & Kennedy (2006) found that when a student is strategically given a supporting role with a student with a disability, both students' learning and engagement improves.

Students with disabilities are entitled by law (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412) to specialized education services, interactions with non-disabled peers, and access to the curriculum regulations. All of these are significant reasons why the determination of LRE needs further exploration. Students with disabilities have IEP Teams that decide where they will be educated and how much of their school day will be spent with non-disabled peers. These IEP Teams also determine what supports, modifications, and accommodations will be provided across all settings and classrooms. The choices IEP Teams make ultimately determine the level of social interactions students with disabilities have with non-disabled peers and how students access the curriculum. The

last decade has seen an increasing amount of students being educated in the general education classroom (87% in North Carolina). While this movement towards inclusion might appear to offer more opportunities and access for students with disabilities, further exploration is needed to determine what has caused this shift and whether or not it is based on individual students' needs.

Overview of the Study and Methods

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews of IEP Team members in order to learn more about how least restrictive environment is interpreted and ultimately determined. In addition, I conducted an analysis of my own personal memos created before, during, and after each interview. I interviewed 20 people who had participated in an IEP meeting during that current school year, which was 2014-2015. Through the course of the study, I obtained approximately 20 hours of interviews, which I also transcribed.

In order to explore different perspectives, I included a range of IEP Team members in my study. I interviewed five people from each of the following groups: (a) parents of children with disabilities, (b) general education teachers, (c) special education teachers, and (d) building-level administrators who have served as LEA Representatives in IEP meetings. All of these people are required members of IEP Teams.

I recruited participants from the school district where I work as a Program Specialist for Exceptional Children. In every interview, I used an interview guide to help structure the interview, but I let the participants determine what paths our discussion would take. By creating a research and interview questions crosswalk (see Appendix C), I

ensured there were interview questions to thoroughly address all four research questions. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcribed interview to review. No one requested revisions of their transcript. To ensure confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for the names of all participants, students and schools.

I used six pre-existing codes to begin analysis of the data. These were:

1. Resources and Funding
2. Legal Requirements
3. Student Data
4. Student Disability Type
5. Student's Academic Skill Levels
6. Student's Behaviors

I did not limit my coding to the above six pre-existing codes but allowed others to emerge during the data analysis. After coding the data, approximately 50 codes emerged based on what participants told me about least restrictive environment. I reduced the narrative to just these codes and ultimately created 21 categories to organize the data. Finally, I took these categories, weaved them together, and identified five emerging themes. These were (a) Lack of Resources and Funding, (b) Legal Requirements as a Burden, (c) Student Data and Characteristics as Deficits, (d) Hierarchy of IEP Team members, and (e) Continuing and Predetermination of Placement.

I created the pre-existing codes based on my conceptual framework for this study, which is depicted in Figure 3. This framework is comprised of four basic tenets that

influence and impact how IEP Teams determine LRE. These four tenets evolved from my review of the literature, which is shared in the next chapter, along with my personal experiences in the field of special education.

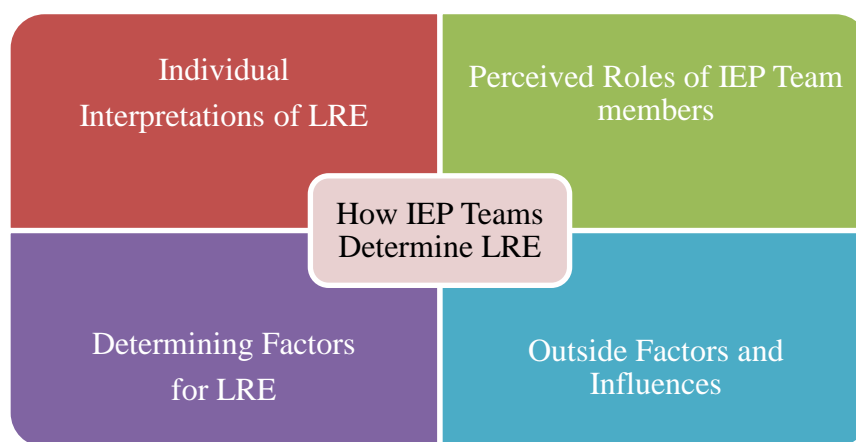


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework for Determining LRE.

As indicated in Figure 3, this conceptual framework has four basic tenets that influence how IEP Teams determine the least restrictive environment. Individual interpretations of LRE are apparent in the literature, and I have witnessed them first hand in IEP meetings. While some IEP Team members believe the student's LRE is always in the general education classroom, others think those classes could be too restrictive, depending on the student. These interpretations influence how a particular IEP Team member makes decisions about LRE. In addition, how a person perceives their role in the IEP Team process will also impact how they determine LRE. While some IEP Team members may see themselves as passive in the decision-making process, others may feel more obligated to facilitate the decision-making process. It is unclear in the literature how IEP Team members perceive their roles in the meeting and decision-making process. The

literature also points to different factors that IEP Teams consider in determining LRE. These included student characteristics, academic levels, and attitudes of staff members. In addition, the literature reveals how outside factors and influences impact the IEP Team's decision about LRE and educational placement. These include state and federal laws, local policies, and the availability of resources. I have also witnessed these as real factors when determining where a student with a disability will receive specialized education and related services.

The four big ideas in my conceptual framework provided me with a structure and focus for my study, and served as the primary lens for analyzing my data. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) was also used to further inform my findings. Critical disability theory is an evolving theoretical framework for the study and analysis of disability issues. It arose from critical theory, which began in the 1930s (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Critical disability theory seeks to unpack disability in terms of knowledge and power and challenges the notion that categories of "disabled" and "non-disabled" should even exist (Watson, 2012). There are seven elements to Critical Disability Theory: the social model of disability, multidimensionality, valuing diversity, rights, voices of disability, language, and transformative politics (Hosking, 2008, p. 5). I draw specifically from the social model of disability and the voices of disability components of CDT to explain some of my findings. Both of these components are revisited and explained in Chapter V: Implications and Recommendations.

Summary and Forecast

In this chapter, I introduced the purpose of this study along with an overview of least restrictive environment and the IEP process. In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature regarding least restrictive environment, along with how IEP Teams make decisions about where students with disabilities will be educated. I provide a detailed account of the methodology, including how I collected and analyzed the data, in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I report the data, which demonstrates what the participants told me about their understandings and experiences regarding LRE. I provide my interpretations of the data in Chapter 5 organized according to the five aforementioned themes. The appendices include my research and interview questions crosswalk, my interview protocol, recruitment documents, consent forms and my IRB approval letter.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A student's IEP Team makes decisions regarding least restrictive environment in the context of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. While this decision-making has existed for decades, it is unclear how IEP Teams actually make this decision. How do team members contribute to the process and ultimately decide how, when, and where a student with a disability will receive specialized education and related services?

In this literature review, I provide a background and historical context for least restrictive environment (LRE) by describing relevant legislation dictating the requirements for least restrictive environment and educational placement. Next I summarize guiding principles for IEP Teams. This guidance is based on legal considerations and implications from court rulings along with recommendations from researchers in the field. Last, I provide state and national statistics to demonstrate where students with disabilities are being educated. These statistics provide insight into how IEP Teams are interpreting LRE.

Background and Historical Context

In the following subsections, I provide a historical context and background information regarding LRE. I discuss key legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), as they have serious implications and mandates pertaining to educational placement and LRE. They

have also spurred educational movements such as inclusion and mainstreaming. IDEA's requirements include that all students with disabilities are entitled to an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that must specifically describe where he or she will be educated and include a LRE justification statement (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 300.17).

State and national statistics reveal a significant shift in where students with disabilities are now being educated. This shift has gone from teaching the majority of students with disabilities in the special education classroom for most of the day to teaching them in the general education classroom the majority of the school day. While the numbers clearly indicate this shift, what is less clear are the reasons why this shift has occurred. The work of the IEP Team ultimately resulted in this increase although it is not clear why.

IDEA and NCLB

Congress required the concept of least restrictive environment, building on previous court decisions, with the passing of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 (Taylor, 2004). The LRE mandate also requires that a continuum of services be provided. The continuum of educational placements has been organized in federal regulations under the LRE mandate. The P.L. 94-142 regulations read:

Each public agency shall insure that a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of handicapped children for special education and related services . . . continuum . . . must include . . . (instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions) . . . (Federal Register, 1977, p. 42497)

Many, such as Taylor (2004), interpret this to mean that instruction in regular classes lies on the least restrictive end of the continuum, while instruction in the home or hospital lies on the most restrictive end. However, some argue that regular classes may be more restrictive, depending on the nature and severity of the disability (Margolis & Tewel, 1990). While opinions differ on which setting is more or least restrictive, along with interpretations of the meaning of LRE, the law still requires school districts to provide a continuum of services. Limited options force IEP Teams to determine the least restrictive environment based on what is available as opposed to what is most appropriate for each individual student. Basing LRE and educational placement decisions on limited options, as opposed to offering the continuum, is not within the confines of the IDEA, but it does happen according to literature and based on my own experiences in the field.

In North Carolina, as outlined by federal guidelines, educational placement in the regular setting means the student with a disability is educated in the general education classroom with his/her non-disabled peers for 80% or more of their day (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2013). Resource setting means the child is taught in a general education classroom for 40-79% of their day, while separate setting means they are taught in the general education classroom for 39% or less of their day. This means the remainder of their day is in a resource classroom. A resource classroom refers to a classroom of only students with disabilities who are taught by a special education teacher. These classrooms are often referred to as special education classrooms, Exceptional Children (EC) classrooms or pullout classrooms.

Many general legal principles can be derived from IDEA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) related to meeting student needs. The overarching themes include the provision of an appropriate education and access to the general curriculum (Osborne & Russo, 2007). Accountability for student performance is a key principle in NCLB and requires that all students participate in state and district-wide assessments (Yell, 2012). Furthermore, student performance data must be disaggregated according to various subgroups, one of which is students with disabilities. This requires districts and schools to closely examine how students with disabilities perform on state assessments as compared to their nondisabled peers as they are now accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities gains in academic achievement.

NCLB also mandates that students have access to the curriculum and instruction from a highly qualified teacher. This means that only a teacher licensed to teach math can deliver math instruction to students. A special education teacher cannot be the teacher of record for a child's math instruction unless he or she obtains a license to teach math. As a result, many schools, as I have witnessed in the last 12 years, have made changes in their service delivery models to meet this requirement and ensure that students are receiving content area instruction from teachers certified to teach that particular content. On the surface, this appears to be a movement towards more inclusive schooling. However, true inclusivity exists only if the students are able to access the curriculum, which will require more than just physical placement into the general education classroom. Their education must be specialized and include those accommodations and supplementary aides

necessary to access the curriculum and participate in their educational environment (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 Sec. 300.114).

Inclusion and Mainstreaming

The terms inclusion and mainstreaming have surfaced in recent decades, as students with disabilities are educated more frequently in the general education classroom. The term *mainstreaming* was commonly used during the 1970s and 1980s and became popularized in special education literature during that time (Bateman & Bateman, 2006). Students mainstreamed during this era were typically those with more mild disabilities such as learning disabilities or mild mental retardation. An example of mainstreaming is when a student is in the regular classroom for math or reading but spends the rest of the school day in the special education classroom. Another example of mainstreaming involves a student spending most of his or her school day in the special education classroom but attending homeroom, recess, and/or lunch with his or her non-disabled peers.

Inclusion has become quite a buzzword in education. It is often used to describe a physical location (i.e. the “inclusion classroom”), but it is a much broader concept. Inclusion is a philosophy and belief system claiming that all students are members of the learning community and classroom, even if abilities and strengths are different (Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010). It is not a physical location but a belief that all students should be afforded meaningful opportunities to participate in and fully access the learning environment with their non-disabled peers.

Inclusive services can include co-teaching or other models in which the general and special education teacher collaborate and consult both in and outside of the classroom to plan individualized lessons, assessments, and activities that allow every child to access the curriculum. Co-teaching as defined by Friend and Cook (2007) is a service delivery option for providing special education services by two professionals delivering instruction together to a group of students in a general education classroom. There are varieties of co-teaching approaches, but the expectation is that both the general and special education teachers are responsible for planning for instruction, delivering instruction, and assessing all learners in a shared classroom. This differs from a service delivery model that removes the student with a disability from the general education classroom. Instead, the special education teacher goes into the general education classroom to work with the general education teacher to provide specialized education services in that setting.

Court Rulings and Legal Guidance

There have been numerous court cases where families have fought for their child with a disability to be included in the general education classroom and overall school environment. The findings of these cases provide IEP Teams with guidance when making decisions about LRE and educational placement. I summarize these cases, along with their guiding principles in the following subsections. These cases demonstrate how the courts do expect IEP Teams to take the decision of LRE seriously and to provide evidence of how and why they made a particular decision. When reviewing court cases involving where and with whom students should be educated, it is useful to begin with

Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the practice of segregation could not be used in public education (Yell, 2012). While this issue involved race and not disabilities, the founding principle in *Brown* to be inclusive holds true for everyone, including those with disabilities. Twenty-two years after the decision, principles from *Brown* were cited in a case involving a child with spina bifida. In *Hairston v. Drosick* (1976) the court stated:

A child's chance in this society is through the educational process. A major goal of this educational process is the socialization process that takes place in the regular classroom, with the resulting capability to interact in a social way with one's peers. It is, therefore, imperative that every child receive an education with his or her peers insofar as it is at all possible. (p. 184)

IDEA does not require all students to be “mainstreamed” or served through “inclusion,” but it does call for integration whenever feasible. It does acknowledge that some students may need a more restrictive or segregated setting in order to receive an appropriate education. In the remainder of this section, I review key court cases involving LRE along with legal recommendations and guidance for IEP Teams.

Roncker Portability Test

The Supreme Court has never heard a case on LRE, but there have been cases tried by circuit courts that offer some guiding examples and principles. In *Roncker v. Walter* (1983), the courts used a portability test to determine if the student with moderate mental retardation was placed in the least restrictive environment. This is now referred to as the Roncker Portability Test and reads as follows:

In a case where the segregated facility is considered superior, the court should determine whether the services which make that placement superior could feasibly be provided in a non-segregated setting. If they can, the placement in the segregated school would be inappropriate. (Roncker, 1983, p. 1063)

The Roncker case has implications for IEP Teams when making decisions about LRE and educational placement. Based on the portability test, schools must determine whether or not the features of the separate setting can be provided, or transported, to the general education classroom. If they can, then the student should be educated in the general education classroom. For example, IEP Teams have claimed that the need for small group instruction necessitates the placement of a child into the special education classroom (Hallenbeck, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1993). Based on the portability test, this is not a valid argument for removing a child from the general education classroom, because through various teaching strategies and methodologies, students can receive small group instruction as needed in the general education classroom. In addition, some of North Carolina's state approved testing accommodations such as multiple test sessions and extended time can be provided in the general education classroom, thus not constituting the need for a child to be placed in the special education classroom for instruction.

Rachel H. Four-Factor Test

From 1985-1989, Rachel Holland, an 11-year old with moderate mental retardation attended a number of special education programs in the Sacramento School District (Yell, 2012). Rachel's parents requested that she be placed in the general education classroom for the entire day in the fall of 1989. The parents placed Rachel in private school and requested a due process hearing after the public school contended that

Rachel's disability was too severe for her to benefit from being in a general education classroom for academic subjects.

The court found that the district failed to establish that the educational benefits of the special education classroom were better than or even equal to the benefits of the general education classroom. The district lacked the evidence to justify its placement decision. Appeals were made and eventually the Ninth Circuit Court decided on January 24, 1994 that the school district has the burden of demonstrating that its proposed placement provided mainstreaming to the maximum extent appropriate. Adopting the lower court's four-factor test, the appellate court determined that the district had not proven Rachel could not be educated in the general education classroom, finding the parents' argument for inclusion to be more persuasive.

The Rachel H. Four-Factor Test consists of the following criteria and can be used to help guide IEP Teams in determining the LRE and educational placement:

1. The educational benefits of the general education classroom with the supplementary aids and services as compared with the educational benefits of the special classroom.
2. The nonacademic benefits of interaction with students without disabilities.
3. The effect of the student's presence on the teacher and on other students in the classroom.
4. The cost of mainstreaming. (Yell, 2012, p. 279)

IEP Teams can use the criteria from the Rachel Four-Factor test to facilitate discussion during the decision-making process. While these factors primarily focus on the impact the student with disabilities will have on the general education and their nondisabled peers, the school is still expected to attempt to educate the child with a

disability in the general education classroom and remove them only when the evidence proves it to be necessary.

Daniel Two-Part Test

The Fifth Circuit court in *Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education* (1989), developed a two-part test for evaluating the compliance of the LRE mandate (Osborne & Russo, 2007). This case involved a 6-year old boy with Down syndrome who was removed from his prekindergarten class for the majority of the school day. He was only allowed to interact with his non-disabled peers at lunch and recess. In a due process hearing, the hearing officer agreed with the school in that Daniel was receiving little educational benefit and was disrupting the class. This case was eventually heard by the district and circuit courts where the Daniel Two-Part Test was created.

The first part of the test examines whether education in the general education classroom could be adequately accomplished with the use of supplementary aids and services. If the school has not made an effort to provide the student an education in the general education classroom, they fail this portion of the test. The second part of the test inquires whether the school has mainstreamed the student as much as possible and appropriate by relying on the continuum of placements. The court found that the school district met both requirements of the two-part test, ultimately satisfying the LRE requirement of the IDEA (Yell, 2012). The *Daniel* decision is the legal authority in many states and was used in the *Oberti v. Board of Education* case.

Oberti v. Board of Education

Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District (1993)

is yet another court case that questioned a student's educational placement. Due to the inability for the student's family and the school system to agree on placement, the courts examined and offered judgment on how schools decide the appropriate placement of a student. In the case of *Daniel*, the court ruled that the school had met both parts of the test, whereas in the case of *Oberti*, the school had not.

Rafael Oberti was born with Down Syndrome and attended the Clementon School District of New Jersey. While he was eight years old at the time of the court's ruling, his parents' fight to gain access to general education classrooms for him began before kindergarten (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993). Before Rafael began kindergarten, his district recommended that he attend a separate classroom in another district.

The district recommended several special classrooms that the Oberti's visited and found unacceptable. Eventually, Rafael's parents reached a compromise with the school system allowing him small amounts of time in the general education classroom. He attended kindergarten at a developmental kindergarten class in the morning at his neighborhood school. The developmental classroom was a general education classroom for children not fully ready for kindergarten. In the afternoons, Rafael attended a special education class in another school district. His parents alleged that he was not afforded appropriate supports and supplementary aides, which resulted in an unsuccessful kindergarten year. While he made academic and social progress, he did demonstrate

behavioral problems. These included temper tantrums, hiding under furniture, hitting, spitting, and repeated toileting accidents (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993).

Due to behavioral issues, the district recommended placing Rafael in a separate special education class for children classified as educably mentally retarded for the following year. Rafael would have to travel to a different district since this type of classroom did not exist within the Clementon School district. The Oberti's opposed this idea and requested that Rafael be taught in a regular kindergarten class in their district. The Oberti's filed a request for a due process hearing after the district refused this placement (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993).

As an alternative to the hearing, the Oberti's decided to mediate their dispute as allowable by New Jersey regulations. Ultimately, both parties agreed that Rafael would attend a special education class for students labeled multiply handicapped at an elementary school 45 minutes from the Oberti's home. The School District promised to look into mainstreaming options at this school and contemplate the regular classroom in Clementon Elementary School as a possible future placement (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993).

Although Rafael showed improvements regarding behavior and academics, the Oberti's learned in the middle of the school year that Rafael was not mainstreamed for any part of his day, and no efforts to do so were apparent. The Oberti's brought another due process complaint in January, 1991. In February 1991, an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) of the New Jersey Office of Administrative Law supported the School District's decision and approved that the least restrictive environment for Rafael was the separate

classroom. They ultimately concluded that he was not ready for mainstreaming (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993).

The Oberti's filed civil action in the United States District Court of the District of New Jersey, along with a claim of unlawful discrimination under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In August of 1992, the district court found that the School District had not established adequate evidence showing Rafael could not be educated in the regular classroom with supports and supplementary aids. The Court also found that the School District was discriminating against Rafael in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act⁵ by denying Rafael's inclusion in a regular classroom (*Oberti v. Board*, 1993). The federal appellate court directed the school board to place a student with disabilities in the regular setting as opposed to a separate special education classroom. The court determined that the school board was ultimately responsible for providing special education and had to prove that the suggested Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was appropriate (Osborne & Russo, 2007).

The Court's decision was partly based on the adoption of the Daniel Two-Part Test (Yell, 2012). In the case of *Daniel*, the court ruled that the school had met both parts of the test, whereas in the case of *Oberti*, the school had not. Both cases exemplify the need for schools to create a system of data collection in order to provide evidence of whether or not a particular placement is yielding educational benefit. As demonstrated in the study by Hallenbeck et al. (1993) this type of data collection does not typically occur.

⁵ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act protects people with disabilities from being discriminated against. Students with disabilities are protected under this law and may have a 504 plan outlining accommodations for assessments and the learning environment.

Within just a few years of the court's ruling, the courts cited the *Oberti* case in at least 20 cases across the United States (Schnaiberg, 1996). The Office of Civil Rights has adopted the *Oberti* case as its benchmark for complaints as the courts ruled that the school district was discriminating against Rafael in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act by denying Rafael's inclusion in a regular classroom. This is due to the perception that the student's rights were denied when the school refused to let him be in the general education classroom. Furthermore, it clearly established that the burden of proof for why a student should or should not be included in the general education classroom falls on the school district, not the student's parent or guardian.

Additional Recommendations for Determining LRE

Julie Weatherly, an attorney specializing in the resolution of special education legal issues, encourages IEP Teams to be careful to avoid procedural pitfalls and other common mistakes found in previous court rulings (Weatherly, 2007). She indicates that all too often IEP Teams make placement decisions prior to an IEP meeting or outside of the context of an IEP meeting, which precludes parental input and involvement. This is a legal issue and also risks damaging the relationship between the school and family. Students should also be encouraged to participate in the IEP meeting if possible and appropriate. North Carolina requires that they be invited to the IEP meeting beginning at age 14 (NCDPI, 2009).

Making placement decisions based on cost or available resources is not within the legal bounds of the LRE mandate. According to policy guidelines produced in 1994 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP),

school districts cannot use a lack of adequate resources or personnel as a reason for failing to provide students with disabilities a FAPE in the LRE (Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002).

The lack of resources is an issue for public schools, but it cannot be used as a reason for removing a child from the general education classroom for instruction or services. IEP Teams must keep in mind that the provision of a FAPE means the student must show educational benefit and does not guarantee the best possible scenario. Thus, collecting evidence to demonstrate educational gain and benefit is imperative in the event that someone questions or challenges a student's specialized education and placement. For example, if a parent or guardian opposes where their child is being educated and/or receiving specialized education and related services, the team should be able to share evidence of how the child is benefiting and showing gains in their current placement. If the team members cannot show evidence of educational benefit, the parent may be able to seek litigation or other means to challenge the team's decision regarding LRE.

Judicial rulings have upheld various levels of restrictive settings. In spite of this, most rulings share common components:

- 1) Some demonstration of academic benefit;
- 2) A finding of non-academic benefits;
- 3) A concern about class disruption;
- 4) A detrimental effect on the education rights of other students; and
- 5) A balancing of the cost of placing the disabled student in the regular classroom. (Daniel, 1997, p. 407)

By using the above components to help determine educational placement, Daniel argues that for some students with disabilities, neither the regular classroom nor the

neighborhood school provides the least restrictive environment. Nonetheless, vagueness in the wording of IDEA results in IEP Team placement decisions that are difficult to explain in measurable terms, and differing court opinions.

Court rulings and legal guidance indicate the need for IEP Teams to monitor students' progress to determine educational benefit and to at least attempt to educate students with disabilities in the regular setting. There is a gap in the research indicating if IEP Teams employ these strategies and legal requirements when determining least restrictive environment and educational placement.

Differing Interpretations of LRE & Guiding Principles

Many, such as Taylor (2004), interpret least restrictive environment to mean instruction in regular classes. Others argue that regular classes may be more restrictive, depending on the nature and severity of the disability (Rueda et al., 2000). There is also disagreement among scholars and practitioners as to what level of mastery a student with a disability should achieve within the general education classroom (Kluth et al., 2002). These differing interpretations have resulted in varying decisions and guidance regarding LRE decisions. I examine these differing interpretations of LRE along with guiding principles in the following sections.

Differing Interpretations of LRE

Margolis and Tewel (1990) view educational placement in the least restrictive environment as related to how and where the student's educational goals can be achieved. Therefore, if a student with a disability can achieve his or her educational goals in the regular classroom, then that is the LRE for that particular student. However, if the

student's goals cannot be achieved in the general classroom, even with extensive assistance and supplementary aides, then the environment is too restrictive and in violation of the concept of LRE. In other words, a setting least restrictive for one may be too restrictive for another. This is a significant shift from other interpretations of LRE where people claim that the regular education classroom is always the least restrictive environment. As Margolis and Tewel suggest, serving students in the regular education classroom does not inevitably mean the student is being served in the least restrictive environment.

Others view the least restrictive environment based on opportunities to learn regardless of whether that is a regular or special education classroom. According to Cawthon, Beretvas, Kaye, and Lockhart (2012), the least restrictive environment is one that facilitates higher levels of opportunities to learn for students with disabilities. They go on to say that these opportunities to learn are not contingent on the student being in the general education classroom, but in the teacher's instructional approach and the student's level of engagement.

Rueda et al. (2000) suggest an extended view of LRE based on a sociocultural framework. They claim the focus should not be on the physical setting but the activity that will be occurring. The same placement can be restrictive or facilitating depending on the social organization and the specific activities that make up a given context. In this framework the fundamental concern is how the social organization of schooling can be designed to maximize learning.

This sociocultural framework was demonstrated in their study of “Fifth Dimension” sites, which take place after school in public schools and recreation centers (Rueda et al., 2000). Field notes were generated from observations of this after school program and various activities where university students partnered with children with disabilities. An analysis of these field notes reveal that these sites mix education, play, and peer interaction as students move through rooms and activities at their own choice and level of mastery. In addition, students track their own progress, are encouraged to set their own goals, and must develop their own strategies and make decisions independently. Consequently, students with disabilities attending the “Fifth Dimension” sites experienced academic and social success and reported that they enjoyed the program. While schools may be limited to recreate this setting during the typical school day, the researchers contend that there are pieces that can be applied in all settings.

In the sociocultural model discussed by Rueda et al. (2000), social mediation and assisted performance are key elements of learning and development. The goal of the program is to differentiate, allow for student choice, and provide assistance that is within the learner’s zone of proximal development. This type of program can be problematic for teachers and school leaders who view teaching and learning as the teacher dispensing knowledge and the student passively soaking it up.

Teachers and school leaders may be apprehensive about serving a student with a disability in the general education classroom for fear that the student cannot complete all of the assignments or master all of the content. Kluth et al. (2002) claim that students with disabilities do not need to keep up with their non-disabled peers. Teachers and

parents often have the misconception that because a student does not have the same skill or ability level as his or her peers, then he or she cannot be in the same classroom. All students do not have to engage in the curriculum the same way to participate in inclusive education.

Students with disabilities receive non-academic benefits from interactions with their non-disabled peers. Sweeden (2009) interviewed parents to explore how inclusive schooling directly benefits their child with a disability. Responses included opportunities to make choices, access to the curriculum, and elevated expectations of self. Student choices frequently occur in non-instructional activities such as lunch where students get to choose what to eat. Parents of children with disabilities felt these opportunities help strengthen self-determination skills and self-esteem. In addition, while not all students may master the curriculum at the same level of complexity, effective inclusion will allow all students to learn at least some parts of the curriculum. Likewise, when students have no access, or are never taught the curriculum, there will be no level of mastery or understanding.

Differing interpretations of least restrictive environment have existed for decades and continues today. Legally, IEP Teams must determine the least restrictive environment for a student with a disability. The literature, including court rulings, empirical studies, and position papers, indicates variance in how IEP Team members interpret LRE. This ultimately impacts the decision making process as each member may have a different understanding of LRE. Court rulings have consistently indicated that an IEP Team must at least consider the general education classroom. Additionally, the Team

must be able to provide evidence of educational benefit regardless of they decide the student will receive specialized education and related services. In spite of this, there is no clear guidance or pattern in how IEP Teams determine LRE.

Determining LRE

Although Margolis and Tewel (1990) do not equate general education classrooms with least restrictive environment, they do stress the importance of considering the general education classroom first when determining a child's educational placement. They also assert that IEP Teams should consider the teacher's instructional methods, flexibility, and attitude towards the student. Graham and Harris (1980) presented similar findings in their study on LRE. After interviewing teachers who viewed students with disabilities as an intrusion and a detriment to the learning environment, they caution that a classroom teacher who thinks a student with a disability belongs in a special education classroom may resent their presence in the general education classroom and as a result make their classroom more restrictive. Although both of these studies are dated, they do indicate that the issue of determining LRE has been around for decades and defied solution. The lack of more recent studies supports the need for additional research.

Osborne and Russo (2007) developed guidelines when considering a more restrictive placement. Students may require a more restrictive placement when:

- They have not progressed in their then-current placements, even with the use of supplemental aids and services
- The cost of maintaining students in the less restrictive environment is unreasonable

- They require a specialized environment to receive a FAPE
- They need specialized techniques of resources that are unavailable in regular public school programs
- They have low-incidence –type disabilities (disabilities that are more severe and rare) requiring contact with peers who have similar disabilities
- They need 24-hour programs of instruction and care
- They require consistency of approach between their home and school environments
- They need total immersion in programs in order to make progress
- Their presence in the less restrictive environment is disruptive to the educational process of peers
- They are dangerous

While these provide guidance for IEP Teams in determining a student's placement, there is no "one size fits all" model and each student's placement should be determined on a case-by-case basis. The above list is also ambiguous, leaving much room for subjectivity. For example, different people may interpret "they are dangerous" in different ways. What might pose a threat of danger to one person may seem trivial to another. IEP Teams should not use the above list as a reason to not attempt to serve students with disabilities in the general education classroom, regardless of the disability category or severity. In addition, the above guidelines should be interpreted carefully as they all do not mirror the judgment of the courts or the procedures set by various states.

Rozalski et al. (2010) created an LRE decision tree based on eleven different court rulings pertaining to educational placement of students with disabilities. The tree poses questions for the team to consider when making the LRE decision. Some of the questions relate to issues of providing supplemental aids, cost, impact on students without disabilities, adequate progress, and educational benefit. While these questions can facilitate meaningful discussion, they also include ambiguous and subjective wording such as appropriate, likely, and feasibly. Figure 4 is the LRE Decision Tree created by Rozalski et al. (2010).

Some IEP Teams contemplate how a particular educational placement will impact teachers and administrators when determining LRE. Hallenbeck et al. (1993) conducted a case study of two students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. They interviewed IEP Team members about how they determined the students' educational placements, which were outside of the regular school. All interviewees noted that placing these students outside of the school was in the best interest of all staff and students. IEP Team members stated that the advantages of this placement included intensive counseling provided by the facility the students would be attending, smaller class sizes, and the facility's capacity to deliver immediate consequences and firmer restrictions.

While IEP Team members in Hallenbeck et al.'s (1993) study could provide reasons and benefits for the educational placement of the students outside of their school, they were unable to list specific criteria used to make the decision. Instead, they provided a list of interventions they tried. Procedures used to make the placement decisions were informal, ambiguous, and difficult for the researchers to comprehend fully. Anecdotal

notes about the student's behaviors and the teachers' attempts to deal with it, as opposed to evaluation data, were used to justify placing the children in a separate setting.

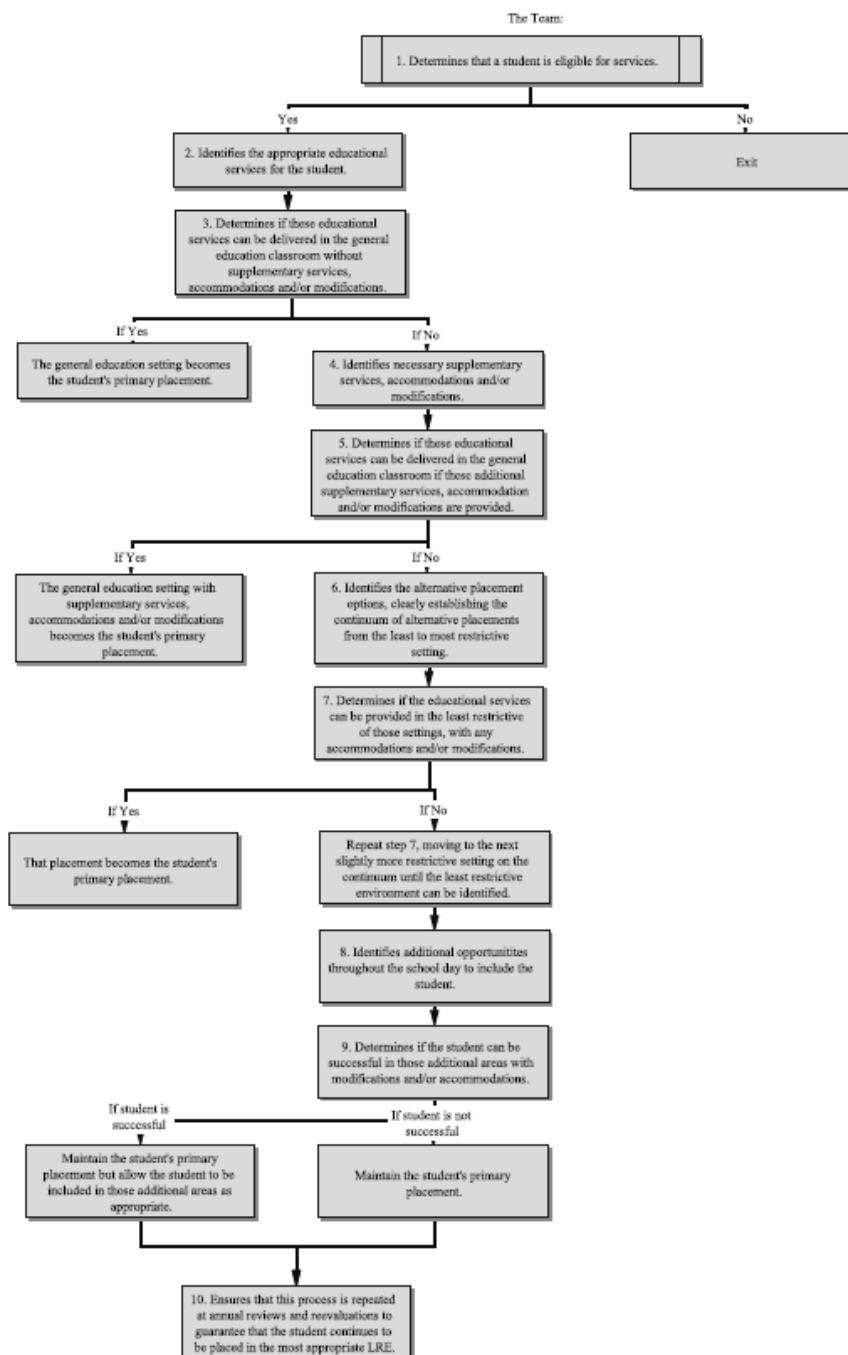


Figure 4. LRE Decision Tree Created by Rozalski et al. (2010).

Background knowledge and experiences may also contribute to how IEP Team members determine least restrictive environment and educational placement. Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, and Simon (2005) administered a survey to 326 preservice teachers at the beginning and end of a course on exceptionalities. The purpose of their study was to determine if the future educators' perceptions changed about teaching students with disabilities in the regular education classroom after taking the course. This Preservice Inclusion Survey (PSIS) used a scale to determine hostility/receptiveness and anxiety/calmness. Their findings indicated that after completing the course on exceptionalities, the preservice teachers became slightly more receptive to the idea of inclusion. The researchers also found that the increased knowledge about disabilities made the preservice teachers less anxious about including students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

The amount of progress a student is making is another component in the LRE decision-making process. Margolis and Tewel (1990) recommend that administrators need to ask "which environment is as close to the regular classroom, and can still meet all of the student's educational needs and assure substantial progress?" (p. 296). Rozalski et al. (2010) caution against the use of one data point and recommend removing a child from the general education classroom only when multiple data points suggest a student is not making adequate progress. This progress should not be minimal or trivial, but meaningful and measurable in order to justify the educational placement. Furthermore, when parents challenge an educational placement it is the responsibility of the school to provide a clear rationale and evidence for their choice of LRE. In other words, schools,

not parents, bear the burden of proof for justifying LRE as they should have the expertise necessary to create an appropriate IEP.

While the studies discussed in this section provide possible decision-making strategies IEP Teams use to determine LRE and Educational Placement, more research is needed to understand the process. Much of the literature provides guidance and suggestions, but these are not grounded in research. Court rulings also provide insight as to how IEP Teams determine LRE as they highlight what is deemed legally appropriate, or more often than not, what the courts have determined is not legally appropriate.

While judicial ruling have upheld various levels of restrictive settings, they consistently emphasize the requirement that a student show educational benefit in whatever setting the team decides to be appropriate. Although differing interpretations of LRE have persisted for decades, the consensus is at least to consider educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Guiding principles regarding LRE decisions exists in court rulings and the literature, but IEP Team members do not consistently use them.

State and National Statistics

In North Carolina, and all states, each school district is required to submit a state performance plan (SPP) found on the state department of education's website. For an example, see the North Carolina department of Public Instruction's website at <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/>. The report, along with other forms of data, includes where students with disabilities are being educated. States submit this data to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) annually. Indicator Five of this report examines free

appropriate public instruction (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In this section, I provide a summary of state and national statistics regarding LRE and Educational Placement along with studies that pose possible explanations for why this data has changed. The change in statistics reveals that IEP Teams are increasingly deciding to serve students with disabilities in the regular setting, meaning the students spend the majority of their day in the general (or regular) education classroom.

This report indicates a students' setting--or their educational placement on the continuum of services. Regular setting means a student with disability spends 80% or more of the day with nondisabled peers, resource setting is 40-79%, and separate setting means the student with a disability spends 39% or less of their day with nondisabled peers. In addition, students with disabilities may receive their education and special education services in a separate school, residential facility, hospital, or through homebound instruction. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the continuum of placements.

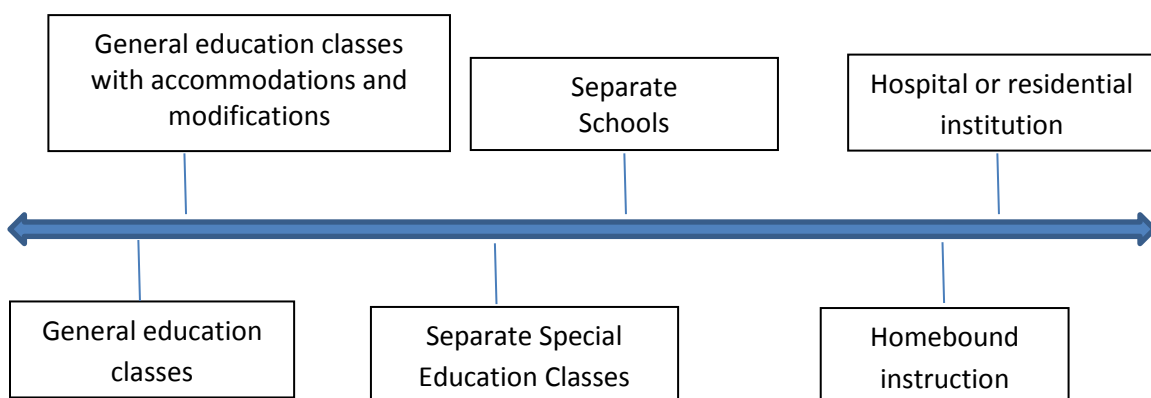


Figure 5. The Continuum of Placements.

Based on the December 2004 report, 60.59% of students with disabilities in North Carolina were removed from the regular class less than 21% of their day. That is, the students received their education in a regular setting. In addition, 17.27% were removed from the regular class for greater than 60% of their day, and 2.23% were served in public or private separate schools. An examination of data on settings for years 2000–2004 show a steady 2.15% increase in students taught in the regular setting, and an increase of 0.03% of students taught in separate facilities or homebound instruction.

Table 1 shows the North Carolina performance plan data for years 2005–2012 and is based on data that districts report to the state. Note that the year stated is the data for that school year, so 2005 represents data for the 2005–2006 school year. In addition to reporting the numbers regarding FAPE in the LRE, the state performance plan also includes the state average for serving students along with their target. The state provides each district with this target information along with the expectation that each district meet the target. Table 2 provides an example of one particular North Carolina school district's report for the 2010–2011 school year. For the 2010–2011 school year, the state target for serving 80% or more of students with IEPs inside the regular class was 65.6%. Overall, the state did not meet the target, but this particular district did at 77.96%.

Table 1

How Students with Disabilities were Served in North Carolina 2005–2012

Year	% of children with IEPs served inside the regular class 80% or more of the day	% of children with IEPs served inside the regular class less than 40% of the day	% of children with IEPs served in separate schools, residential facilities, or homebound/hospital placements
2005	60.59	17.27	2.23
2006	61.59	16.87	2.18
2007	62.6	16.5	2.1
2008	63.6	16.1	2.1
2009	64.6	15.7	2.0
2010	65.6	15.3	2.0
2011	65.6	15.3	2.0
2012	65.6	15.3	2.0

Table 2

District Report for State LRE Target 2010–2011

LRE	State Target (%)	State Average (%)	Did State Meet Target?	LEA (%)	Did District Meet Target?
Indicator 5a: Percent of children with IEPs inside regular class \geq 80% of the day.	\geq 65.60	64.80	No	77.96	Yes
Indicator 5b: Percent of children with IEPs inside regular class $<$ 40% of the day.	\leq 15.30	14.50	Yes	11.85	Yes

Table 2

(Cont.)

LRE	State Target (%)	State Average (%)	Did State Meet Target?	LEA (%)	Did District Meet Target?
Indicator 5c:					
Percent of children with IEPs served in public or private separate schools, residential placements, or homebound or hospital placements.	<= 2.00	2.10	No	1.30	Yes

While this particular district did meet the state target in all three LRE measurements, not all districts do. When a district does not meet a target set by the state, North Carolina takes specific measures in an attempt to help the district and state meet the target percentages. The state takes these measures in order to meet the targets set at the federal level. Just as each individual district strives to meet the state target, the state strives to meet the national target. Measures taken by North Carolina to increase the numbers of students with disabilities being served in the regular setting include providing training and technical assistance to districts in the implementation of LRE determination process, and parent training on LRE (North Carolina department of Public Instruction's website: <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/>). Parents are a required IEP Team member and should have input as to where their child will receive instruction and special education services (Bateman & Bateman, 2006; Yell, 2012).

As another measure to increase the numbers of students with disabilities being served in the regular setting, the Division of Exceptional Children for the state of North Carolina also worked to increase the quality of supplementary aids from 2005 – 2012 by increasing promotion of research-based reading, math, and writing instructional strategies in special and general education settings. This initiative also included an increase in the implementation of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS), Instructional Consultation teams, and Response to Instruction (RtI) models. The state also provides targeted technical assistance regarding LRE decision-making to identified LEAs that have continued to fail to make progress towards the State targets. I include these strategies and action by North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction because this is the location of my study.

While all of these initiatives can be found listed on the North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction website, specific descriptions of exactly what the trainings, technical assistance, and consultation models involved are not listed (<http://www.nccecas.org/apr2010-2011/leareportcards2010-11.html>). It is also unclear as to whether or not the changes in LRE were a direct result of the State Department's intervention. Pressure to meet the target percentages could also be a contributing factor for why there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities being taught in the general education classroom.

In the U.S., 60.5% of the students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom for 80% or more of their day in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Students in the resource setting comprise 20.1% and 14.2% are

in the separate setting. From 1990 through 2008 there was a significant increase in placements in general education settings and a sizable decrease in resource and separate settings (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010). Students placed in separate settings declined approximate 25%, while students placed in resource settings declined around 30%. These decreases were accompanied by an increase of 93% in educational placements in the general education setting.

These changes were largely due to the overall change in placement practices for students with learning disabilities (LD). In 1990, 22 percent of students with LD were served in general education classrooms compared to 62% in 2009 (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011). This means that over 260,000 students were no longer served in separate classrooms or separate schools. In addition, these years witnessed a 50 percent decline in students with LD who were being served in resource or pullout classrooms, or approximately 424,000 students.

Crockett (1999) contends that prior to the LRE mandate, students were usually educated in settings based on their disability category rather than individual needs. However, category may still influence decision making as indicated by significant discrepancies in educational placement among the different disability categories (McLaughlin, 2009). While 55% of students with learning disabilities are educated in the regular setting, that percentage drops to 16% for students with intellectual disabilities, and 35% for students with emotional and behavior disabilities.

The data indicates a significant increase in students being served in the regular setting. This increase reflects a change in how IEP Teams are determining the least

restrictive environment for students with disabilities and ultimately deciding on their educational placement. Is this change due to a paradigm shift in how IEP Teams feel about including students with disabilities? Or is it a response to mandates in legislation such as the IDEA and NCLB? In their study of national and state trends, McLeskey et al. (2011) attribute this decline to changes in legislation, increased emphasis on accountability, and initiatives such as response to intervention (RtI). On the surface the increase in inclusive services may appear as a more caring and democratic way to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Yet at the same time, this drastic change in how we provide specialized education may have stemmed from a desire to meet a state or national target and not to meet the individualized needs of the child. Decisions that are institution-centered and not child-centered open the door for inequities and socially unjust schools. They also violate to letter and spirit of IDEA, which seeks to protect and serve students with disabilities. My concerns about how IEP Teams are determining LRE and educational placement center around whether or not the institution of education is staying focused on what the child needs and creating meaningful plans to ensure FAPE.

Implications and Additional Research

As evidenced in this review of the literature, there have been many court cases considering least restrictive environment (LRE) and inclusive practices. Each of these cases deem that if a student with a disability can be educated within the general education classroom with support and supplementary aids, the school district cannot legally place the student outside of that classroom (Bateman & Bateman, 2006). These cases also indicate that schools should be able to produce documentation of carefully selected steps

taken to include the student with a disability in the general education classroom. This documentation should be accompanied with a comparison of how each setting would or would not benefit the student. Otherwise stated, the school should be able to demonstrate which setting would yield the greater educational progress for the child and why. This progress can be both academic and non-academic in nature, including social and communication skills as well as improved self-esteem (Wyoming Department of Education, 2010).

IEP Teams should base the placement decision on the documentation of greatest educational benefit to each child with a disability, thus educating the student in the least restrictive environment. Regardless of the quality of education a school provides, if they are not collecting evidence to demonstrate a child's educational gain, or lack thereof, the court will likely find on the side of the parent or guardian who contests an educational placement. Furthermore, if the school does not attempt to teach a student with a disability in the general education classroom then the opportunity to collect such evidence is not possible.

Research indicates a significant shift away from teaching students with disabilities in special education classrooms (resource/separate setting) and toward educating them in the general education classroom. While this shift may be due to court rulings, parent advocacy, limited resources and changes in regulations, there is no clear data to substantiate this claim. Guiding principles exist for determining the LRE from those in the field, but there is a lack of research to determine how IEP Teams draw from these

principles. In fact, there appears to be no clear set of decision-making strategies or methods used by IEP Teams in determining least restrictive environment.

Court rulings provide some guidance for IEP Teams concerning educational placement and LRE, but these are reactionary and open for interpretation. Although it is clear, based on legislation and court rulings, that IEP Teams should provide documentation of how they determined LRE, along with how a student is progressing, little guidance exists as to how to gather and use that data to make educational placement decisions. My review of the literature revealed a need for additional research to help provide IEP Teams with more concrete decision-making strategies and tools. This laid the foundation for my study and helped to drive my research questions. Categories that emerged became the framework for investigating how IEP Teams determine LRE. These categories, as part of a carefully planned research methodology, are presented in the next chapter.

I developed a conceptual framework for this study based on my review of the literature, coupled with my experiences as an IEP Team member over the last eighteen years. This conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 6.

Individual interpretations of LRE are apparent in the literature, and I have witnessed them first hand in IEP meetings. While some IEP Team members automatically assume the LRE to be the general education classroom, others think those classes could be too restrictive depending on the student. These interpretations influence how a particular IEP Team member makes decisions about LRE. In addition, how a person perceives their role in the IEP Team process will also impact how they determine

LRE. While some IEP Team members may see themselves as passive in the decision-making process, others may feel more obligated to facilitate the decision-making process. It is unclear in the literature how IEP Team members perceive their roles in the meeting and decision-making process. For example, I have only participated in IEP Team meetings as the special education teacher, which limits my perspective on the process of determining LRE.

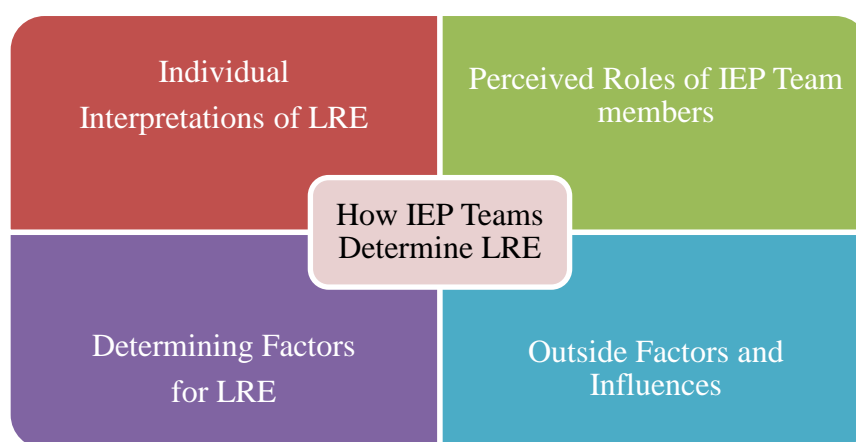


Figure 6. Conceptual Framework for Determining LRE.

The literature also points to different factors that IEP Teams consider in determining LRE. These included student characteristics, academic levels and attitudes of staff members. In addition, the literature reveals how outside factors and influences impact the IEP Team's decision about LRE and educational placement. These include state and federal laws, local policies and the availability of resources. I have also witnessed these as real factors when determining where a student with a disability will receive specialized education and related services.

The four big ideas in my conceptual framework provided me with a structure and focus for my study. After developing this framework, I was able to develop research and interview questions, and create codes to analyze my data, which ultimately led to the overall themes of my study. A through explanation of these codes, along with the other components of my methodology, is provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The data in my literature review indicated that IEP Teams are deciding to serve more students with disabilities in the general education classroom for the majority of the school day. What was missing in my review of the literature and prevented me from being able to explore in depth, were the voices behind those making the decisions about LRE and educational placement. Numbers and percentages do not reveal how and why IEP Team members make decisions about where to educate students with disabilities. I have worked in the field of special education for eighteen years, and the more I reviewed the literature the more I began to question how IEP Teams that I was a part of made decisions about LRE.

To explore how IEP Teams determine least restrictive environment, I knew I needed to go directly to the source. In order to hear and share the voices of IEP Team members throughout this study, I chose to conduct a qualitative study and interacted with IEP Team members directly through individual interviews. The purpose of this research study was to investigate how IEP Team members determine least restrictive environment (LRE) in times of increased accountability and expectations of more inclusive schooling. In this chapter, I provide a thorough explanation of the methodology of the study.

Research Questions

The research focus over the course of this study was to examine how IEP Teams determine the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. More specifically, the study investigated the criteria IEP Teams use to make decisions about LRE. This study asked participants who have served on IEP Teams about the functioning of IEP Teams, particularly as it determines LRE. Research questions included:

- How do IEP team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when they make decisions regarding a student's individualized education plan?
- How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?
- How do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?
- What outside factors and influences (if any) do IEP Team members consider when they determine LRE and Educational Placement?

The research questions, a comprehensive review of the literature, and my own experiences in the field of special education guided the research process.

Overview of the Methodology

According to Crowley (2010), in qualitative studies the researcher should focus on using methods of inquiry that lead to a textual understanding of the phenomenon they are studying. These methods should foster an in-depth depiction of human interactions, endeavors, situations, and perceptions. While there are a number of methods qualitative

researchers use to gather data, the most commonly used methods are interviews and observations (Crowley, 2010; Roulston, 2010). Semi-structured or guided interviews solicit meaningful conversation between the researcher and the participant. Additionally, using a small number of participants and interviews allows for more time with participants and the ability to schedule follow-up interviews as needed.

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews of IEP Team members in order to elicit different perspectives regarding how least restrictive environment is interpreted and ultimately determined. I also created memos before, during, and after each interview to capture my thoughts and any information not expressed directly through the words of the participants. After much consideration, and because of my positionality in the field of special education, I decided to forego the use of IEP documents and IEP Team meeting minutes as additional data sources. Due to the vagueness of IEP Team minutes, and given that they are not required by national or state regulations, I do not view them as valuable data points. The actual IEP paperwork was also not included as a data source due to the lack of detail in the documents. While IEP Teams are required to indicate their choice of educational placement (regular, resource, separate) on the IEP documents, they do not always provide a rich amount of detail regarding how they arrived at determining that placement.

Having been in the field of special education for eighteen years, I have attended hundreds of IEP meetings. In many of these meetings, I have witnessed how the IEP Team members complete the IEP documents as more of a checklist of requirements rather than a tool to facilitate the decision-making process and meaningful discussion

about the student. While the documents indicate what the team determined to be the least restrictive environment for a particular child, they do not provide rich data illuminating how the team arrived at their decision. For these reasons, I chose to interview various team members in order to gain richer data and insight into how IEP Teams determine LRE and ultimately educational placement for students with disabilities. I wanted the participants to be able to share information beyond what they, or another IEP Team member wrote in the IEP.

During the course of this study, I interviewed twenty people who had participated in an IEP meeting during the current school year, which was 2014–2015. I only included participants who had participated in IEP meetings within the current school year in order to ensure that they had recent involvement in the process and for greater clarity in examples for them to reference. I interviewed five people from each of the following groups: (a) parents of children with disabilities, (b) general education teachers, (c) special education teachers, and (d) administrators who have served as LEA Representatives in IEP meetings. All of these people are required members of IEP Teams. The administrator serves as the representative of the local education agency (LEA Representative), more commonly known as the school district. While I have attended IEP meetings in which the LEA Representative was a classroom teacher, school counselor, or other staff member, I only included principals and assistant principals in the interviews. I did this because they are in the best position to ensure that the student receives the services documented in the IEP, and they have the authority to commit resources. There is also considerable support

in literature for principals and assistant principals serving as the LEA Representative in all IEP Team meetings (Bateman & Bateman, 2006; Bateman et al., 2007; Yell, 2012).

Selection of Participants

The goal of qualitative research is to describe and interpret, not generalize. Sandelowski (1995) suggests that determining how many participants to include is a matter of judgment. She goes on to say that qualitative studies often use a small number of participants and cover material in depth. With that in mind, I knew that with a smaller number of participants I needed to spend more time in order to dig deeper to obtain richer data and allow for follow-up sessions as needed. It was not necessary for me to conduct any follow-up sessions to clarify any of the transcribed interviews.

I conducted this study in the school district where I currently work as a Program Specialist for Exceptional Children. In this role, I work directly with two middle schools and two high schools to provide guidance and support regarding their special education programming. Although I am not in a supervisory position, I do work out of the district office, which could have resulted in some participants viewing my role as authoritative and thus serving as a limitation in this study. However, being somewhat familiar with the IEP Team members participating in the study fostered more openness in the interview as rapport was pre-established. To ensure they felt open and honest with me during the interview, I reiterated that I would not use their name, the names of any students with disabilities, or the name of their school in any written summaries of the study. I also assured them that it was not my goal to uncover illegal or unethical practices but to gain a better understanding of how IEP Team members determine LRE.

Every participant appeared very eager to contribute to the study and talked openly about their experiences. At no point in any of the interviews did a participant appear uncomfortable or hesitant in their dialogue. Interviews averaged 60 minutes and the majority of that time involved the participant talking and not me. Most participants thanked me for asking them to be a part of the study and commented that the experience caused them to reflect more on their role in the IEP process.

I asked each participant to provide their own pseudonym and asked parent participants to provide one for their child. While some participants appeared to have fun coming up with their own pseudonym, others asked me to “*just call them whatever.*” Several participants chose their pseudonym based on someone holding a special place in their heart such as a favorite teacher, a student who affected them on a personal level, or a family member who supported them through school.

To determine the special education teacher, general education teacher, and administrator participants, I generated a list of twenty-four potential participants who are knowledgeable about the research topic and have served as an IEP Team member during the current school year. This list provided eight participants for each IEP Team member role, which provided me with five participants, and three “back-up” participants in the event that the first five on the list were not able or willing to participate. While most people responded within 24 hours that they were willing to participate, some did not respond at all or were reluctant to give me times that they could meet. If someone did not respond after my second contact, I moved on to the next person on the list. It was important to me that I only involved participants who were comfortable participating in

the study and that they did not feel pressured to participate. Ultimately, I did reach my initial goal for study participants and interviewed five general education teachers, five special education teachers, and five school-based administrators. I purposefully ensured that the list of participants represented a range of schools and participants from varying backgrounds and experiences. Table 3 represents basic information about each of the school-based participants.

My district currently has a Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) for special education that meets monthly. The district's Parent Liaison organizes and leads these meetings. I contacted the Parent Liaison for a list of parents that might be willing to participate in the study. I also asked several of my colleagues for potential contacts. Eventually, I had a list of approximately twenty parents. I narrowed that down to five and made sure to include a range of disabilities represented by their children. I also ensured that I had parents of children who were served on various levels of the continuum of services, including separate, resource and regular. I wanted the pool of parent participants to represent a range of services on the continuum (see Table 4).

Table 3

School-based Participant Information

Pseudonym	Role	Current school	Years of experience working in public schools
Liza	General Education Teacher	Elementary	8
DeeDee	General Education Teacher	High	14

Table 3

(Cont.)

Pseudonym	Role	Current school	Years of experience working in public schools
Mark	General Education Teacher	Middle	13
Rachael	General Education Teacher	Alternative	17
Marcie	General Education Teacher	Middle	3
Sabrina	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	20
Laura Jean	Special Education Teacher	Elementary, Self- contained AU Classroom	30
Eli	Special Education Teacher	Middle	8
Paula	Special Education Teacher	Middle	31
Carlie	Special Education Teacher	High	15
Jeter	Assistant Principal	High	20
Jonah	Principal	High	20
Derreck	Principal	High	30
Suzie	Principal	Elementary	14
Jimmy	Principal	High	7

Table 4

Parent Participant Information

Pseudonym of parent	Pseudonym of child	Child's current school	Disability
Katie	Dean	High school	Intellectual Disability-Moderate (ID-MO)
Martin	Stella	Elementary	Autistic (AU)
Jewel	GiGi	Middle	Intellectual Disability – Down's Syndrome
Sarah	Paul	Elementary	Learning Disability (LD)
Felicia	Gaige	High School	Serious Emotional Disability (SED)

Once I finalized a list of potential participants, I contacted each person individually via phone or email. For these contacts, I used a recruitment document (see Appendices F and G for Recruitment Documents). All participation was voluntary and a consent form included a statement regarding their right to remove themselves from the study at any time (see Appendix H for Consent Form). Participants received no compensation for their time but had access to their interview transcripts prior to any publication. As a recruitment incentive, all participant names were entered into a drawing for one of five ten dollar gift cards for their chosen retailer or restaurant.

Lichtman (2013) insists that confidentiality be maintained with all data collected to ensure that participants feel comfortable openly discussing the questions. To maintain this confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for all participants, their institution, children with disabilities and the school district in all written summaries of my study. Participants

had a reasonable expectation that any information they divulge will remain confidential and I outline the specifics of this in the informed consent. My recruitment of participants intentionally drew from a range of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. I excluded no one based on race, gender or ethnicity.

All records for this study were kept confidential. Research records were kept on password-protected computers and in locked filing cabinets. As the primary and only researcher in this study, I was the only one who had access to the records. The audio-recording of interviews were destroyed once they were transcribed. All recordings were transcribed within two months of the taping. Additional details are included in my IRB approval (see Appendix I for IRB Approval Letter).

Data Collection

I created a research and interview questions crosswalk to ensure I thoroughly addressed all research questions in the interviews. This also served as an interview guide and ultimately the source of my interview questions (see Appendix C). I provided each IEP Team member this guide at the start of the interview and I modified the questions according to the various IEP Team members. In addition, I provided many of the terms and concepts in *“lay person language”* to increase discussion and responses.

When planning interview questions, it is important to include different types of questions that will stimulate, not limit, conversation. Lichtman (2013) recommends three types of questions: (1) personal questions to get to know the person; (2) concrete questions that have them recall specific facts, thoughts, or situations; and (3) feeling questions to elicit feelings and information about how they reacting to a particular

situation or event. These types of questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, thus opening the conversation as opposed to shutting it down. I purposefully included all three types of questions in my interview protocol to stimulate conversation and gather richer data (see Appendices D and E for interview protocols).

The guided or semi-structured interview involves a set of predetermined questions but also allows for variance based on the situation (Lichtman, 2013). Refusing to stray from a list of interview questions will impede the amount of information the participant can provide. It may also result in the researcher only focusing on what they believe to be relevant, when there could be variables and circumstances that provide much insight but not considered prior to the interview. However, having a set of questions also serves as a guide to ensure that all questions and areas are covered during the interview. It also helps the participants feel more comfortable to see the set of questions being used as it provides clear guidelines. Based on these recommendations I used a set of interview questions but did not allow these questions to limit the participant's contributions and viewpoints (see Appendices D and E for interview protocols).

Interviewing individuals is not just a set of questions but a process. Lichtman (2013) provides guidance with this process and recommends the interviewer view this process as several stages. The first stage is building trust and gaining rapport. Lichtman recommends the interviewer do this by disclosing what the study is about, why the participants were selected, and how the information gleaned will be used. Connecting with the participants will also help to yield rich data and can be achieved when the interviewer reveals personal information about his or her self. As explained by Garton

and Copland (2010), interviewing should be a form of interaction mutually created by the interviewer and the interviewees. The relationship formed early on in the interview will help maintain a two-way conversation where the interviewees feel safe to share information that will ultimately make for a richer more meaningful study.

During my study, interviews lasted approximately one hour, which provided me with twenty hours of interview data. After telling the participant a little about myself and what my study was about, I asked them a few general questions to build rapport. Interviews of all teachers and building level administrators took place in a school or district building, although I offered them to meet them in an off-site location if they preferred. Every teacher and school-based administrator requested that the interview take place on his or her school campus. For the parent interviews, I met at the location that he or she requested which included either a coffee shop or their place of employment. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed afterwards. No video recordings occurred. It was not necessary for me to conduct any follow-up interviews. I was able to get through all of my questions and every participant provided me with very thorough responses.

I transcribed all interviews, which produced approximately 185 pages of transcripts. Participants were emailed a copy of their transcribed interview to review. I asked them to review it and let me know if there were any changes that needed to be made including additions or omissions. This allowed them full access to what they said during the interview in the event that they were not fully comfortable with how their statements were transcribed. None of the participants requested that I make any changes

to the transcriptions. Several did express concern in their grammar and over use of the word “um . . .” They were concerned that any direct quotes might make them appear as if they were rambling or that they did not speak well. I assured them that direct quotes would be minimal and reminded them that their real name, name of their school, and name of their child with a disability (for parent participants) would not be used in any written summaries of the study.

Data Analysis and Reporting the Findings

Grbich (2007) recommends several strategies for data analysis including:

- a) bracketing out your own experiences; b) entering a dialogue with individual participants; c) reflecting on what you have gained through reading and rereading and through journaling your thoughts including any questions and response, and d) Identifying the major themes from narrative texts using processes of preliminary data analysis and/or thematic analysis. (Grbich, 2007, p. 88)

Interviewing each participant one-on-one facilitated a meaningful dialogue. Immediately following each interview, and then again as I transcribed each one, I included my own reflections and thoughts in memos. This allowed me to capture my ideas that were still “fresh” after the interview. The memos created during this process were also part of the analytic process as notes were made about tentative ideas regarding categories and relationships. It also allowed me as the researcher to include and analyze non-verbal messages such as body language and tone. For example, during several of the parent interviews there were times where the parent became emotional and cried. This also elicited emotions from me. The transcribed interview would not reveal this if I included

only their words. To capture the entire story, I included memos documenting those times where emotions were present.

The goal of qualitative research is not to count but to “fracture” the data and ultimately rearrange them into categories (Strauss, 1987). This allows the researchers to compare things in the same category and organize the data into broader themes, issues, and theoretical concepts. Categories emerge as the researcher reviews the memos, field notes, and interview transcripts. I analyzed the data using codes that I established prior to data collection and then also developed additional codes based on what emerged during the course of my study.

Creswell (2007) cautions researchers about the sole use of *a priori* or pre-existing codes as they have the potential to limit the analysis to making the data fit the predetermined code as opposed to opening up the codes to reflect the views of participants. Open coding involves taking the interview transcripts and segmenting them into categories and information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (2007) recommends researchers develop a small number of categories and then slowly reduce them down to approximately five that will ultimately become the major themes of the study.

Following the above recommendations, I began my study with a small number of codes while remaining open to any others that might emerge throughout the course of the study. By using the six codes below I was able to develop categories and ultimately themes from my data. My pre-existing general areas or codes, included:

1. resources and funding;
2. legal requirements;

3. student data;
4. student's disability type;
5. student's academic skill levels; and
6. student's behaviors.

I created the above codes based on my review of the literature along with my own beliefs of what influences the IEP Team when determining least restrictive environment. These beliefs stem from direct experiences in IEP meetings. Empirical studies about determining LRE are scarce, so I also reviewed the legal requirements regarding LRE, recommendations from those in the field, and implications from court rulings. These readings, and my own experiences and conversations with IEP Teams, resulted in my development of the six codes listed above. I used these codes to both create my interview questions and help analyze the data gleaned during the study. In a sense, this study was my journey to discover if these areas have any impact or influence on how IEP Teams determine least restrictive environment. Of critical importance was the notion of moving beyond my own perceptions of how IEP Teams determine LRE in order to share the evidence collected, while still maintaining a relationship beyond the two.

To begin the coding process, I printed all transcripts so that I could highlight and color code as needed. I started from the beginning of each transcript and highlighted all responses that fell into one of the six pre-existing codes. I then went back through each transcript numerous times for additional thematic analyses. For each idea that was germane to the study, but not falling into one of the pre-existing codes, I made up a code and wrote it next to the response. After this open coding, I had approximately 50 new

codes. Next, I reduced the narratives to just these codes and ultimately down to 21 categories. These categories were linked directly to my conceptual framework, which were the four big areas I sought to explore throughout the study (Individual Interpretations of LRE, Perceived Roles of IEP Team members, Factors Determining LRE, and Outside Factors and Influences). I then took these categories and weaved them together using graphic organizers and charts to make the five themes of my study. Figure 7 provides a visual summary of this process.

Researcher Subjectivity and Bias

According to Creswell (2007) the researcher's interpretations based on social, cultural, class, gender, and personal politics will shape her or his writings and analyses. He goes on to suggest that what we choose to study, how we analyze the data, and how we write is a reflection of our own understandings based on the cultural, social, and personal politics we bring to research. The goal of the researcher is not to reach a total objectivity through the removal of all biases, but to fully disclose how this subjectivity impacts the study.

In a qualitative study, researchers should bracket their own thoughts and opinions on the particular phenomenon so as to not influence their thinking during the investigation (Lichtman, 2013). This process of bracketing requires the researcher to acknowledge any preconceived beliefs they may have and then ultimately set them aside during the data collection and analysis stages of the study.



Figure 7. Data Analysis Process.

Reflexivity refers to a researcher's capacity to reflect on his/her own values before, during, and after the research (Lichtman, 2013). Reflexivity is an ongoing self-analysis that asks who you are as a person because of your experiences and background, and ultimately how it informs your research. This helps you be mindful of subjectivity and makes sure it does not negatively impact your study. While not all subjectivity has a

negative impact on a study, researchers should employ several trustworthiness strategies if they want their findings to be considered credible and a contribution to their field.

I openly acknowledge that my decision to study LRE, and my interpretations of data collected may have been impacted by both my work as a special education teacher and by having a nephew with a disability. I have worked in the field of special education for 18 years, eight of which as a special education teacher. The level of access students have to the curriculum and social interactions with non-disabled peers varies from school to school and district to district. As a special education teacher, I was an advocate for more inclusive schools and continue to do the same in my current role as a program specialist. Additionally, I have watched for years as my brother and his wife have fought to keep their son in regular classes when the school and district sought to have him in a separate classroom and at one point a separate school. While it is impossible for researchers to maintain total objectivity, it is important to acknowledge subjectivity throughout the research process.

Trustworthiness Strategies

All researchers will inevitably have some influence on their research and its results. However, strategies can be utilized to reduce bias and increase trustworthiness and validity (Lichtman, 2013). Through member-checking, the data collected are returned to the participant and they are given the opportunity to provide feedback in the event that they disagree with how the researcher's interpretation of their responses. Data that are dependable, credible, confirmable, consistency, and applicable are deemed trustworthy (Crowley, 2010).

After transcribing all interviews, I provided each participant with a copy so they could check it for accuracy. It was important to me that I captured their voice and not what I interpreted their voice to be. No participant asked me to make changes, but I had several comment on their grammar. I assured them that it is very common for quotes to represent conversational grammar and not technical writing. By providing each participant with a copy of their interview transcript, and having no one ask for revisions, I feel certain that what I captured is trustworthy, dependable, confirmable and free of bias from me as the researcher.

I also collected data from multiple sources. By ensuring that I had five members from each group (parents, special education teachers, general education teachers and LEA representatives) the data collected was valid, consistent and credible. There were several data points that were expressed only once, and by only one participant. This does not make the data less valid or credible but serves as an outlier and deserving of further exploration.

In this chapter, I presented a description of the methodology used in this research study. The research questions, interview protocol, participants, data collection and analysis, researcher subjectivity and bias and trustworthy strategies are all essential considerations. The next chapter focuses on the results and what they reveal pertaining to the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Throughout the course of this study, I sought to better understand how IEP Team members determine least restrictive environment. My review of the literature included numbers and reports that indicated how students with disabilities are being taught in the general education more frequently, and for a greater portion of their school day. What was missing in the literature was the how and why. The numbers, being faceless and voiceless, did not speak to how and why IEP Teams are deciding to serve more and more students with disabilities in the general education classroom for the majority of their day. Through my interviews with twenty different IEP Team members, I was able to explore the how and why regarding how IEP Teams make decisions about LRE and educational placement for students with disabilities. In the remainder of this chapter I share what these IEP Team members told me regarding each of my research questions. I begin with a summary of participants followed by a presentation of the purpose and research questions. Lastly, a summary of the findings are depicted based on the stories told to me by the participants.

Summary of Participants

During the course of this study, I interviewed 20 IEP team members. This included school-based participants and parents of children with disabilities. School-based participants included five general education teachers, five special education teachers, and

five school-based administrators. I purposefully ensured that the list of school-based participants represented a range of schools and participants from varying backgrounds and experiences.

Additionally, I interviewed five parents of children with disabilities, making sure to represent a range of disabilities. I also ensured that I had parents of children who were served on various levels of the continuum of services, including separate, resource and regular.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams determine the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities. More specifically, the study investigates the criteria IEP Teams use to make decisions about LRE. The following research questions guided the investigation:

- How do IEP Team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when they make decisions regarding a student's individualized education plan?
- How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?
- How do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?
- What outside factors and influences (if any) do IEP Team members consider when they determine LRE and Educational Placement?

Based on a review of the literature, and my own experiences as an IEP Team member, I created the following pre-existing codes to code and analyze the data:

1. Resources and Funding
2. Legal Requirements
3. Student Data
4. Student's Disability Type
5. Student's Academic Skill Levels
6. Student's Behaviors

As I analyzed the data, additional codes evolved which I then organized into twenty-one categories within my conceptual framework.

The remainder of this chapter summarizes the data collected throughout the course of this study. Results are organized according to the four fundamental ideas in my conceptual framework:

1. Individual Interpretations of LRE
2. Perceived Roles of IEP Team Members
3. Determining Factors for LRE
4. Outside Factors and Influences

Within these four concepts are sub headings noting the various categories that emerged as I analyzed the data. The four major concepts, taken from my conceptual framework, along with the categories that emerged across all participants, are depicted in Table 5.

Table 5

Emerging Categories across All Participants

Big Concepts	Categories Across All Participants
Individual Interpretations of LRE	Opportunity for Success
	Normalcy
	Learning and the Continuum of Services
Perceived Roles of IEP Team Members	Special Education Teacher as Authority
	General Ed Teacher as Curriculum Expert
	LEA ensures legality
	Parents in dualistic roles
Factors Determining LRE	Disability area
	Academic skill levels
	Accommodations and modifications
	Continuing previous placement
	Predetermination of placement
Outside Factors and Influences	Teacher allotments
	Limited options
	Highly qualified status
	Teacher & Principal Evaluations
	High Stakes Testing
	Local Policies
	IDEA
	High Demands on Teachers
	Expectations of “Higher-ups”

Individual Interpretations of LRE

At the start of each interview I explained the overall purpose of my study and then asked a few questions to get to know the participant and build rapport. Next, I asked them to explain what least restrictive environment (LRE) meant in their own words. This was to address my research question number 1: How do IEP team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when making decisions regarding a student's

individualized education plan? Across all participants the words opportunity, success, normalcy and learn were spoken consistently. This is further evidenced in Appendix J, where I provide a table citing how each participant described LRE in their own words. The table is organized according to IEP Team member role. I provide a summary of how participants interpreted LRE in the following sections.

Opportunities for Success

All four participant groups indicated that the least restrictive environment should provide opportunities for success. Sarah, the parent of a child with a Learning Disability (LD) described least restrictive environment as, “Being in a regular class and an EC class as much as necessary to get them the best educational opportunities as possible.” When probed to elaborate on what she meant by educational opportunities she said, “It is where they are going to get the most academics.” Derreck, a high school principal said, “The LRE should level the playing field and provide the best opportunity possible to be successful.” Carlie, a high school special education teacher, described LRE as, “The place where a student can be most successful and gain the most from education.”

When I asked participants to elaborate on what opportunities and success looked like, their responses were ambiguous. For example, Carlie responded to my request to elaborate with, “You know, where they are learning.” Rachael, a general education teacher described LRE as, “Where they are going to have the best experience for them to learn and be the most successful and an opportunity to achieve academically.” Participants consistently equated success with academic achievement. Many measured this achievement by grades and end-of-grade/ end-of-course tests. As far as where these

opportunities for success could occur, participants consistently indicated that it could be the special education classroom or the general education classroom, or they did not specify either location.

Normalcy

The word “normal” surfaced frequently from all four participant groups. When asked to explain what they mean by normal, participants generally responded vaguely with something similar to, “you know, like everybody else.” It was evident in their definitions of LRE, that both school staff and parents held the belief that students with disabilities should not be segregated from their peers all day if possible. Parents consistently expressed that LRE should allow their child opportunities to be around “typical” or “normal” students. For example, Felicia, the parent of a child with a Serious Emotional Disability (SED) shared, “It means you are trying to provide them with a normal setting and not make them feel separated and restricted from the normal classroom.”

School-based participants also placed value on normalcy and helping students achieve a sense of normalcy while at school. Jonah, a high school principal, said the following with regards to normalcy, “At the end of the day what all of us really want is to be what we consider to be normal. Whatever that is. We want to be like everyone else. We don’t want to be different.” Mark, a general education teacher used the word normal to refer to a classroom setting, “. . . it’s like a normal type of setting of a classroom as opposed to a small group or something like that.” The general education classroom was viewed as normal by many participants, whereas the special education classroom was

viewed as stigmatizing and not the norm. This is evidenced in a comment by Eli, a special education teacher, “. . . the environment that is least confining, least stigmatizing . . . we are just trying to define what works for them and sometimes that may take them away from other students they would normally receive instruction with.”

With regards to normalcy the consensus across participants was that children should remain in as normal an environment as possible in attempt to maintain normalcy. In addition, participants believed that students with disabilities will feel more normal when they are around non-disabled peers.

Learning and the Continuum of Services

As discussed in the review of the literature (Chapter II), schools are legally required by the IDEA to provide the continuum of services. All participants were aware of the options on the continuum including regular, resource, and separate settings. They demonstrated this awareness by either using the term - continuum of services - or by providing the various options available including regular, resource (EC) and separate classrooms. Many also added that while they were aware of the various settings, their school did not provide all of them. One example included a self-contained program that was available, but at another school. It also included resource classrooms that they were not able to offer due to regulations around highly qualified teacher status. Participants frequently used the phrase “inclusion classroom.” When asked for clarification they indicated the inclusion classroom to be a co-taught classroom meaning the students remained in the regular education classroom and the special education teacher went in during that class period to co-teach with the general education teacher. All participants

voiced the need for students to be around their non-disabled peers for at least some portion of the day. Generally speaking, their conversations indicated a strong belief that it was not ethical to separate a student from the regular school environment for the entire school day.

Teachers and administrators did not emphasize the regular setting or inclusion as much as parents. They left it more open to whatever setting the child would gain the most. Several special education teachers indicated that the LRE may be the regular education classroom or the special education classroom, depending on the child's needs. LEA Reps left it open to whatever setting might be "best" for the student. General education teachers did not consistently refer to a specific setting or classroom, but stressed the need for students to be successful and able to learn for it to be the least restrictive environment.

While all participants indicated the need for all students to learn, they did not always indicate a specific location for that to happen. Many said this learning may need to happen in a special education classroom for at least part of the student's day. Paula, a special education teacher said, "We are just trying to define what works for them and sometimes that may take them away from other students." Laura Jean, also a special education teacher, responded in a similar way,

A lot of people think LRE means being in the mainstream and with typically developing kids as much as possible, but I see it as being where the child has the fewest number of restrictions placed on their ability to grow and learn and that doesn't necessarily mean being with typically developing peers. I think an environment is more restrictive if the kid feels lost and cannot grow.

Others were more ambiguous and did not mention a specific setting or classroom. For example, Jimmy, a high school principal said, “LRE is whichever placement that would allow the child access to the curriculum with the right amount of support.” This seems to leave it open to a regular education or special education classroom. Overall, the parent participants wanted their child to be included as much as possible while still getting the help they needed to address their disability and skill gaps.

Discussion about abbreviated day surfaced in several interviews. Examples were provided where a student would be taught in a co-taught classroom for English and math and then leave school for the remainder of the day. Since 100% of their school day is in the regular education classroom this places them in the regular setting on the continuum of services, although they are only there for half, or even less than half, of the entire school day.

Perceived Roles of IEP Team Members

In every interview, specific questions were asked to explore the role of various IEP Team members in determining LRE and educational placement. These questions were asked to address research question 2: “How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?” While answers varied slightly based on how participants perceived their roles, and that of other IEP Team members, four categories emerged across all four participant groups. These included:

1. Special education teacher as the authority
2. General education teacher as curriculum expert

3. LEA representatives ensure legality

4. Parents in dualistic roles

Responses from each of the four participant groups are organized in a table entitled “*Perceived Roles of IEP Team Members*” (see Appendix K) to help demonstrate the aforementioned categories. This includes how each IEP team member perceived their role, and the role of the other IEP team members. I have summarized participant responses in the following four subsections. Each subsection represents a category that emerged as I analyzed the data.

Special Education Teacher as Authority

As evidenced in the table in Appendix K, most participants view the special education teacher as the leader who is “in charge” of the meeting. This held true in all four participant groups, including how special education teachers perceive themselves in an IEP meeting. For example, Eli, a special education teacher said, “I am the leader in determining where the child is going . . . what I say carries a lot of weight.” Throughout the interviews, it became clear that both general education teachers and LEA Representatives view the special education teacher (also referred to as the EC teacher) as authority and expect them to take the lead in the meeting and decision making process. This is evident in the following quote by Rachael, a general education teacher, “The EC teacher heads up the process and are kind of the supervisor.” Marcie, another general education teacher mirrored Rachael’s response in her statement, “The EC teacher takes the lead because they are the ones with the real knowledge base.”

The LEA Representatives expected the EC teacher to know the law and the child since they typically spent more time with the student than other IEP Team Members. This made it logical, in the opinion of the LEA Representative, for the EC teacher to be in an authoritative role in the IEP Team meeting. Although, Suzie, an elementary school principal voiced concern over eliminating the opinions of other IEP Team members all together:

Here, EC teachers do give us a chance to voice our opinions, which has not always been the case at other places I have been. I have been in some places where the EC teacher said here is what we are doing, we sign, and that is that.

While LEA Representatives want everyone to express their opinions, they expect the EC teacher to be in charge of the meeting and ultimately take the lead on determining LRE.

Parents also viewed the EC teacher as an authority in the meeting and sometimes not making sure all members understand what is being said and decided upon.

Often times they take the lead and make themselves as the authority as to what should be done. A lot of the time they talk over the parent and use a lot of language that the average parent just does not know. They facilitate the meeting and tell everyone else pretty much this is what we are doing. (Felicia, parent of a child with a disability)

Although not all parents felt the same way as Felicia, all parents shared that the EC teacher runs the meetings and has the greatest impact regarding the determination of LRE and where their child will be taught.

Participants consistently indicated that EC teachers held an authoritative position in the IEP meeting and their recommendation carry more weight with regards to

determining LRE and educational placement. This also resulted in the EC teacher being anesthetized during the decision-making process as if they were just going through the motions without taking time to feel and process what was being decided. This is evidenced in the below quote:

It's almost like tying a shoe in that we do it so much without consciously thinking about it and we don't always take time to process it. So, this is good that you are asking these questions to make us think about it. (Laura Jean, EC teacher)

Because EC teachers were rarely questioned about their recommendations, they did not feel the need to explain them.

General Education Teacher as Curriculum Expert

All four participant groups perceived the general education teacher as a curriculum expert. Paula, a middle school EC teacher, said “they help me understand the curriculum.” Sabrina, an elementary school EC teacher, said “they help give perspective about what's going on in that grade level along with expectations and homework.”

While general education teachers also viewed their role in IEP meetings as providing information about curriculum and school routines, they did not see their role as having a huge impact on determining LRE and where a student will be taught. This is demonstrated in the following statement from Rachael, a general education teacher. “They (EC teachers) ask for my opinion about a student's strengths and weaknesses but I do not have a huge impact on where a student should go.”

Parents view the general education teacher as a good source of information regarding classroom activities and what their child is capable of doing in the classroom.

Katie, the child of a student with an intellectual disability, describes the general education teacher's role as "speaking about classroom expectations and field trips and other activities."

While general education teachers were perceived as curriculum experts, they were sometimes perceived as not knowing a lot about the child being discussed in the meeting. This was voiced by LEA Representatives, parents and general education teachers themselves. Below are examples of quotes from all three of these participant groups.

I talk about what I see in the classroom, but sometimes I do not teach the kid. It really should be someone who teaches the kid. (DeeDee, a general education teacher)

Hate to say it, but sometimes there is a regular ed teacher who is in the meeting who hasn't had the student, who doesn't really know the student, bare are in there because it is their planning time. (Jeter, a high school assistant principal)

The regular ed was there because they have to have a regular ed teacher . . . there were times when the regular ed teacher didn't even know my child so couldn't even make any comments. But, because she was a regular ed teacher she was there. Didn't even have my student. You know that didn't go well with me (laughs). (Felicia, parent of a child with an emotional disability)

While no one agreed with having a general education teacher in the IEP meeting who did not know the student, they readily admitted that it occurred and viewed it as a problem in the decision making process.

LEA Representative Ensures Legality

All four participant groups perceived the role of LEA Representative as ensuring legality and overseeing the "big picture." Overall, teachers viewed LEA Representatives as helpful in sharing options while monitoring compliance to legal requirements. Paula, a

middle school special education teacher said, “LEA Reps tell us what resources are available and make sure we are legally responsible. They have a big picture point of view.” Liza, an elementary general education teacher shared a similar view, “They see things from big picture and provide discipline and academic options.”

LEA Representatives also viewed their roles as ensuring the law was followed, but also as the one responsible for making sure things are put into place to for this to happen outside of the meeting. Suzie, an elementary school principal spoke about this in the following quote:

Making sure our master schedule is constructed in a way that allows for flexibility so students can get what they need and still get core instruction. Sometimes I am the liaison between the school and the family and visit them at home or before or after the meeting to make sure they understand. Of course making sure we are adhering to the laws as a school. Making sure we are not making a lot of decisions before the meeting.

Suzie, and the other LEA Representatives viewed their role regarding LRE and placement as one that stretched beyond what happened in the context of an IEP meeting.

While parents also viewed LEA Representatives as ensuring everyone “stayed in line” some also felt they did not have a lot to contribute because they did not know their child. This is evident in the below quotes from parents.

They are there because they have to be. I mean, they are supportive . . . but I think it is because they trust their teachers so much and they rely on their teachers to know what they are talking about. (Sara, mother of a child with a learning disability)

Maybe I am reaching a little bit for this but I think LEAs should really have all the information needed in order to discuss a student in an IEP meeting. I know the principal doesn’t have time to sit down and read through the entire IEP, but get

some background. You know what I'm saying. Let's say at a high school you have several different principals and they are assigned to a particular grade. Don't have a senior principal sitting in on a freshman's IEP if he doesn't know the kid but maybe has only seen them on the campus. If you have been assigned a group of students that you are to have stewardship over then you need to know those students. Maybe nothing in depth or academically but some kind of comment to make about the child. (Felicia, mother of a child with an emotional disability)

While parents did not expect principals to be experts about their child, they did express a desire for them to gain some knowledge about their child and his or her disability.

Parents in Dualistic Roles

During discussions about the perceived roles of various IEP team members, school based staff (special education teachers, general education teachers, assistant principals, and principals) commonly viewed parents in one of two ways. Several used the phrase “one extreme or another” or “on the flip side” to describe how parents are involved in the IEP process and determining LRE.

School-based participants consistently stated that they think parents should advocate for their child. When they shared stories and descriptions of their interactions with parents, they painted a dualistic picture of parents. Table 6 displays excerpts from teachers and principals as they described how they perceive the parent's involvement in the IEP process and determining LRE. Each row represents how seven different school-based participants described parents in an “either-or” fashion. While teachers and principals voiced how they want parents to advocate for their child and take a more active role in the IEP process, Table 6 demonstrates how they often have a negative perception of parents who do take an active role.

Table 6

Dualistic Roles of Parents as Perceived by School-based Participants

Either	Or
They want their child to be independent.	They want their child to have a lot of services and feel like it is their right to get every possible service even if they don't need it; demanding.
Just sit back and say whatever you think is best is fine by me.	Advocate for their child and come in and say I want this, this and this.
Don't want anything to do with it and just sign the paperwork.	So over the top involved that you spend all your day trying to please them.
Don't want their children labeled because of the stereotype – usually lower socioeconomic status.	They are an educated parent, from higher socioeconomic populations who get upset if their child does not qualify when we tested them and they get outside testing to make sure they qualified because they knew the resources that would be available down the road.
Extremely active and knew exactly what they wanted and was not going to take no for an answer. There was discussion about possibly removing some services and the parent was like, “no that is not going to happen.”	The other side is you do get a lot of parents here, particularly our non-English speaking parents who just nod their heads and sign. Even with the interpreter they just . . . that is a battle you fight.
Sit and nod and sign the paperwork.	On the opposite end of that spectrum and they come in with just enough information to be dangerous so to speak and they don't necessarily know . . . they know they want what is best for their child but they don't always know, I think, what is best for their child.
They either have no clue.	Or they bring an attorney.

Determining Factors for LRE

Participants shared various data sources, student characteristics and other rationale that IEP teams used to help determine least restrictive environment and educational placement. These included disability area, academic skill levels, accommodations and modifications, continuing the previous setting and the predetermination of placement. These are described further in the following subsections.

Student's Disability Area

A wide range of responses were elicited regarding how much a student's disability area impacts the IEP teams determination of LRE and ultimately their educational placement. Some participants said it did not impact the decision at all while others were adamant that it had a great deal of impact on the team's decision. This range of responses was evident in all four participant groups.

Marci a general education teacher, said "I don't think it is ever said, but has to have some impact . . . I look at the student as they don't always fit their mold." Jeter, a high school assistant principal said that "it has no impact whatsoever on the team's decision." Eli, an EC teacher said, "Most kids who are intellectually disabled (ID) are in the resource class. Some are in the co-taught class but it is very difficult and they have to work harder."

A few parents felt strongly that the disability label does impact the IEP team's decision and provided some specific examples from first-hand experiences:

I do think it dictates where they are taught. Some labels get different treatment from others. Most OHI are taught in a regular setting. Most of them. A child that

is deaf or blind often gets put in in a self-contained (separate) setting. (Felicia, parent of four children with disabilities including OHI and SED)

Felicia shared that her opinion was based on not only being a parent of four children with disabilities but also a teacher assistant in a self-contained EC classroom. She felt that if a child had a physical disability people also assumed they had an intellectual disability even though she did not believe one automatically meant the other.

While other parents felt that the disability label impacted the IEP team's decision regarding LRE, they regarded this impact differently. While some viewed it as an assurance that their child would get special attention, others saw the label as confining and felt that it closed doors for their child. For example, Katie, whose son has an intellectual disability said "A child's disability category would have to impact where they should be taught because every child is so different and they all need different things like my son needed a one-on-one." Conversely, Jewel, also the parent of a child with an intellectual disability, viewed the label differently:

Honestly, I do think it matters. That was . . . especially when she was younger and we were trying to keep her in a regular classroom for as much of the day as we could that was something I remember saying in an IEP meeting is . . ., because I have experience in the classroom (worked for two different school systems in special ed and general ed as an instructional assistant—and also volunteered in my children's classrooms, and subbed both short term and long term at various schools) I knew there were kids who functionally and academically were not any more advanced than my child but she had other areas where it made it difficult like she struggled with transition and things like that throughout the day. My question to them was, do you want her to go to a separate classroom because you can because she has Down Syndrome? She was already out of where a lot of the children with Down Syndrome were as far as the regular setting . . . I just think for some it is kind of taken for granted and they think oh she will be in a self-contained classroom because she has this so she cannot function and will be in the separate classroom. It is different with Autism where there is a spectrum. I

imagine there are some parents who feel that way about their child as well. With Down Syndrome you just have it so that's always something people consider . . . her physical appearance gives you a clue that she has Down Syndrome with her features and such so people automatically assume that she has intellectual or cognitive disabilities. I think they just . . . it matters. It does. It may not determine things but it puts people in a certain frame of mind in the beginning. Now they may be able to get past that and see the student's strengths and abilities . . . we definitely had teachers who did that right away and we had teachers who never fully probed in to what she could and could not do. We have had both experiences in that some shut doors and others were more open-minded.

Student's Academic Skill Levels

All participants believed that a student's academic skill levels did impact the IEP team's determination of LRE and educational placement. Generally speaking, the further below grade level the student performed in reading, writing and math, the less likely he or she would be taught in the general education classroom for the majority of their day. The majority of participants stressed the importance of reading skills and being able to work independently.

While there was continuity among teachers and parents about the need to consider academic skills as part of the criteria in determining LRE, opinions differed as to how what level a student should be performing in order to be taught in a regular education classroom. Principals and parents tended to have a more lenient view of where a child must perform in order to be taught in the regular education classroom. The chart in Appendix L provides an extensive listing of how each of the four participant groups responded about how academic skills impact LRE determination. I provide a summary of their responses below.

Special education and general education teachers cited grade levels as a determining factor in determining LRE. Sabrina, an elementary special education teacher gave a specific grade level that a student needed to stay in the general education classroom in her following statement, “If he is two years behind grade level then we may want to consider pulling him out so we can really focus on specific needs.” Liza, an elementary school teacher provided a similar factor in her statement, “I would say if a student is in 2nd grade and working on pre-K skills they need to be pulled out of the classroom and working with an EC teacher.” Jimmy, a high school assistant principal felt that three grade levels behind indicated a need for the child to be removed from the general education classroom and voiced that when he said, “As a rule of thumb if they are no more than 3 grade levels behind we let them be in the general ed program.” A few parents also used grade level as a determining factor in LRE although they did not provide a grade level equivalency. Katie, the mother of a child with an intellectual disability expressed this when she said, “They would need to read and write on a certain level, absolutely. Math skills are necessary too.” Katie did not have an issue with her son being removed from the general education for the majority of his day. She preferred that he be taught in a special education classroom and advocated for him to have a one-on-one assistant, which he did for the majority of his schooling.

Not all participants felt a student should be removed from the general education classroom if they were not performing on a particular grade level. This was more commonly voiced by principals and parents as evidenced in the below statements:

No, there are not academic skill requirements to be in the regular education classroom because all of our kids come in . . . I mean . . . if you have 25 kids in your classroom you have 25 kids at 25 different levels. It's more about did we meet the student where they are and take this student from where they were and grow them. (Jonah, a high school principal)

Even though they might be in third grade and are not reading on third-grade level, why should they be taken out of that class during that reading section and secluded away from their peers? (Martin, father of a child with Autism)

Overall, parents and principals expressed a more inclusive philosophy for students with lower academic skills when compared to teachers.

Participants across all four groups regularly stated behavior and motivation to be just as important as academic skills as a criteria in determining LRE and educational placement. While EC teachers focused more on academics and grade-level skills, regular education teachers focused on behaviors. These behaviors included self-regulation, independence, desire to learn and willingness to try. DeeDee, a high school general education teacher said that the biggest thing is that “they just have to want to try.” Marcie, a middle school general education teacher said, “To be in a regular education classroom they have to be a self-starter . . . and not need someone standing over them all of the time.”

Accommodations and Modifications

Overall, participants specified that a student's accommodations and modifications, as listed on their IEP, did not impact the IEP team's decision regarding LRE and educational placement. Teachers consistently shared that they do not really make a difference because so many students have them on their IEP, their 504 plan or their ELL plan (written plan for English Language Learners). Principals also indicated

that accommodations and modifications do not really matter anymore, as teachers have gotten accustomed to them, as they are commonplace. An explanation of accommodations and modifications is provided in Table 7.

Table 7

Accommodations and Modifications on the IEP

Accommodations	Modifications
Changes in how test is administered that do not substantially alter what the test measures (Wright, Wright, & O'Connor, 2010).	Substantial changes in what the student is expected to demonstrate on a test or assignment (Wright et al., 2010).
- examples include, but are not limited to, extended time, read-aloud, dictate to scribe, marks in book, separate/small group setting, etc.	- changes include, but are not limited to, modified assignments, modified grading, alternate assessments, etc.

While accommodations and modifications are common, and according to participants in this study do not impact the team's decision about whether or not the student will be taught in a regular education classroom, the overall assumption was that the accommodations and modifications would be provided by the EC teacher in the general education classroom.

I have never heard a teacher say that kid needs to be in an EC room because we cannot provide those accommodations in the regular classroom. Now, I have had teachers say that separate setting for testing is going to be challenging to do if the EC teacher is out but those are things you work around. (Jonah, high school principal)

I haven't seen that make a big impact on where they are placed . . . my co-teacher does a lot of modifications and accommodations for me and then I can help

everybody else . . . which is what co-teaching is all about I guess. (Marcie, general education teacher)

For the most part, students who had accommodations and modifications on their IEPs were taught in co-taught classrooms so that the EC teacher could provide them. If they were in a regular education classroom with no co-teacher, and a test was being administered, the EC students were typically sent to the EC classroom at a specific time to receive their testing accommodations.

Continuing the Previous Placement

Continuing students in the same setting year after year surfaced as another consideration in determining LRE and where a student would receive special education services and core instruction. Participants indicated that when determining where a student will be taught in the context of an IEP meeting, they usually leave them in the setting they are currently in, be it a self-contained classroom or all regular classes. At times the decision to continue the current placement was made because the team did not know the student very well at that point, or they assumed the current setting to be working. For example, students just entering middle or high school are not well known to the teachers so they go by the recommendations of the sending school. “By high school, we do what has always been done. Especially freshman year. We have to go by the middle school’s recommendation until we have our own data” (Jeter, high school assistant principal).

Some participants expressed concern over possible missed opportunities and about how it is difficult to move a student out of a separate setting once they are placed there. This is expressed in the following excerpts:

Sometimes I worry do we give enough opportunity . . . do we keep them where they are because it is working or do we take a chance? (Jonah, high school principal)

Once they are in the EC classroom that is usually where they stay. (Marcie, general education teacher)

It is very difficult to move from a more restrictive to a less restrictive because everybody looks at a kid that was self-contained and they always think the kid should be self-contained and with the first problem they think they kid needs to go back. I feel like a self-contained program is like the military. Easy to get in but hard to get out. Sometimes I look at a kid and think, look how much they have grown! They have out grown me . . . and we want that. (Laura Jean, special education teacher)

It's almost like someone educated in a special education classroom . . . it's a fraternity in itself and the general education teachers just doesn't crack that door. (DeeDee, a general education teacher)

They are easy to hand the kid over (to the EC teacher/ class), but reluctant to take the EC kid back into their classroom. (Derreck, a high school principal)

While most participants voiced that students were prone to continue in the same setting year after year, several did share that they knew the setting should be reconsidered on an ongoing basis. This is exemplified in the below interview excerpts:

It does not have to remain the same. Pull-out in second grade doesn't mean they need it in fifth. (Suzie, an elementary school principal)

It is open for discussion . . . not set in stone. (Martin, parent of a child with Autism)

IEP team members shared that they knew they could change a student's educational placement, but did not specify specific criteria for how they determine when a student's placement on the continuum should be changed.

Predetermination of Placement

At least one participant in each of the four participant groups divulged that the educational placement of a student is sometimes determined before the meeting. This predetermination occurs through conversations and/or pre-meetings in which the EC Teacher indicates the preferred service delivery option for a student with a disability. Having the IEP paperwork already filled out prior to the meeting was another indicator of predetermination of placement. This concept of predetermining placement is exemplified through the following interview excerpts:

Our EC teachers are really good about meeting with us before and talking about whether it would be a good situation for a push-in or pull-out. And, the EC teacher already has all of the paperwork filled out so that really helps the meetings to not last so long. (Liza, general education teacher)

I will say that we probably go in with a pretty good idea of how we are going to serve this child . . . the continuum and the setting. (Sabrina, special education teacher)

A lot of times teachers go into meetings with predetermined outcomes. That speaks to the school's culture. As a principal, I have to challenge that predetermined outcome. Predetermination of decisions drives a lot of IEP meetings, especially without parent input. (Derreck, high school principal)

I feel like the decision had already been made before I got to the meeting. So we are just going to sit here and you tell us what you have written on the paper and we are going to agree. If I had a question you could tell they didn't like that. Now, if I was Dr. So and So . . . Dr. So and So is going to get a different . . . there is going to be a different feel in the meeting than it would be for just me, Felicia. They know the Dr. is more educated and you know more on top of things. His status is going to give him more clout and a little more respect . . . and their reaction is different in that they are like, oh what a misfortune for Dr. So and So

that his child is like that . . . I'm like hell, why isn't it sad that it happened to me and all of these other parents? (Felicia, parent of four children with disabilities)

While predetermining a student's placement was described by parents, LEA Representatives and teachers it was not always viewed as a problem. Furthermore, when it was described as a problem most felt unable to do anything about it due to a lack of their understanding of the process, or the limited options available for students.

Outside Factors and Influences

The fourth, and final, research question sought to explore the impact of outside factors and influences on IEP teams when determining LRE and educational placement. I analyzed the data using the two codes: (a) resources and funding, and (b) legal requirements and expectations. As I analyzed the data, I created nine categories which are depicted in Figure 8. The nine categories listed in the arrows above are summarized in the following subsections.

Teacher Allotments

The issue of allotments and a desire to provide more inclusion classrooms consistently surfaced during interviews with secondary teachers and administrators. Secondary schools, which include middle and high school in this particular district, are organized so that students change classes for each core content area. The term "*content area*" is used throughout this study to encompass math, English language arts, science and social studies. A middle or high school student will have a different teacher for each of the core content areas. Participants use the term "*inclusion classroom*" when referring to a classroom co-taught by a general education and special education teacher.

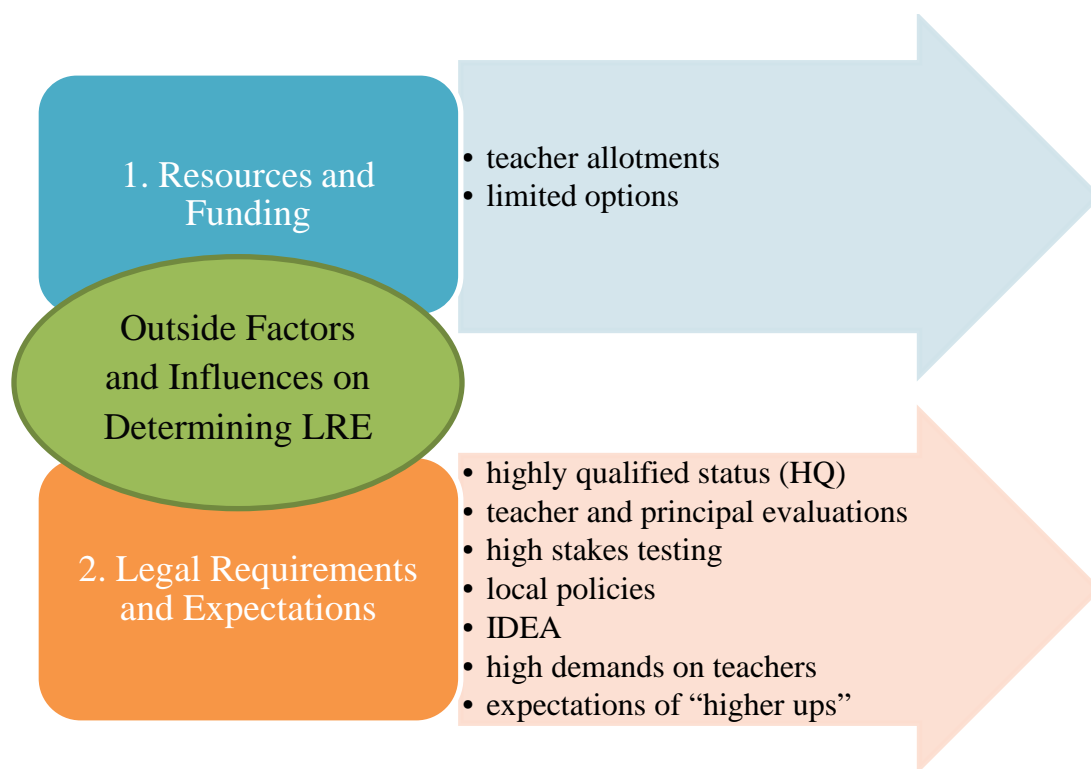


Figure 8. Outside Factors and Influences in Determining LRE.

Both teachers and principals expressed frustration around not being able to offer inclusion classes in science and social studies due to only having enough teacher allocations to cover math and English. Carlie, a high school special education teacher, expressed concern about how the decisions in IEP meetings are based on classes available:

Honestly we don't have much choice anymore because the only places we co-teach are math and English and that is due to budget constraints. We weren't told that we couldn't co-teach in other classes but it's just that with the staff we have we cannot manage to cover all the classes we need. Other districts offer inclusion science and social studies, but we don't have the staff to do that.

Carlie provided several examples in which the team did not write inclusion science or social studies into a student's IEP even though they felt they really needed the services.

LEA Representatives expressed similar frustrations regarding limited course options. Jeter, a high school assistant principal stated, "In a perfect world we would offer co-taught science and social studies . . . because we cannot we target English and math and go from there."

Limited Options

While teachers and administrators listed specific course options that they felt were unavailable due to limited resources, parents shared how they wished there were more options in general for their child. Parents who have lived in more than one state or district also spoke to how there were different offerings and options based on where they have lived. For example, Felicia, who has a son with a Significant Emotional Disability (SED), shared how in one district the IEP team listed counseling on the IEP, but when she moved to another district she was told "*we don't do that here.*" She added that in her opinion her son may have been more successful in the regular setting if he had services to address his behaviors, emotions and social skills. Felicia had similar experiences with academics. When she asked in an IEP meeting if her son could receive services in the EC classroom for writing she was told he could not get services in writing because the district did not have a writing curriculum or intervention to address his deficits.

Other concerns about limited options were expressed by Jewel, whose daughter Gigi is taught in a self-contained classroom which lies on the separate end of the

continuum of special education services. Jewel felt as if her daughter's needs could be better met if there were more options regarding classrooms and staffing:

Schools need more options. The self-contained classroom my child is in . . . the range is huge. It is like they are trying to teach Spanish and French at the same time because the students are completely different. They would never ask a regular teacher to teach calculus and AP history but really in my child's class that's what they are asking. Like a lot of the parents I talk to, I have a hard time with it because we see the range and wonder what is our child going to get . . . it is either here or here on the continuum and there is not enough in between and that is a struggle for a lot of parents. Not enough flexibility with staffing and funding and not enough options in the middle.

Participants' responses and experiences in IEP meetings consistently included their feelings of frustration over limited options. While school-based participants assured me that they knew they could not use a lack of resources or options as a basis for making a decision about LRE and educational placement, it seemed to be the "elephant in the room" as they reflected on their participation in various IEP meetings. In other words, while IEP members felt that a student with a disability would receive more educational benefit from a different setting or service delivery, they knew it was not available and so it was not part of the team's discussion.

Highly Qualified Status

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires special education teachers to be highly qualified (Bateman & Bateman, 2006). This means that for a special education teacher to be the primary teacher of a core subject (i.e. English Language Arts, math, science, social studies) then they must be highly qualified (HQ), or certified to teach, in that subject area. A special education teacher may be certified to teach one or

more of these subjects. On the other hand, some special education teachers may not be certified to teach any of the core subject areas. If that is the case, they can be allowed to co-teach, where the general education teacher is teacher of record, or they could deliver instruction or intervention in the EC classroom. In either scenario, they are not the teacher delivering the primary instruction in a core subject, and they are not assigning a grade for that core subject. This is primarily an issue in secondary schools, and throughout the course of this study, all participants working in a secondary school described it as a factor when determining where to serve students with disabilities.

For example, Jimmy, an assistant principal expressed his frustration in not having the money to hire highly qualified people:

It would be great if we were in a situation where we could hire more teachers that had backgrounds in EC and general education courses but those people cost money . . . those are expensive teachers to hire because they are well sought after. You know, money and the human resource part of it is frustrating.

Jimmy shared scenarios where the IEP team would have decided to provide a student with their content area instruction in an EC classroom, but there was not an EC teacher with highly qualified teaching status that could serve as teacher of record.

Mark, a general education teacher, spoke of how it “*handcuffs administrators*” when they are creating the EC schedule. He went on to say,

It has certainly driven the school to have more students in inclusion than in pull-out. If you do not have an EC Teacher who can be teacher of record for math you don’t have a resource math class. I would like to think that research has shown that a student can be more successful in an inclusion classroom and we are moving in that direction because of that, but I cannot help but wonder if it is because of resources.

Teacher and Principal Evaluations

During the course of the study, several principals shared their concerns about how evaluations might impact how an IEP team member determines LRE and educational placement. Student performance on test scores is incorporated into teacher evaluations. While no teacher or principal disclosed that this was ever discussed in the IEP meeting, a principal did express concern that it might influence a teacher even if they did not mention it during the meeting.

I can see where it could cause a regular ed teacher to push for separate setting so their name is not attached to that student's score. I could also see an EC Teacher pushing for an inclusion setting so their name is not the only one attached to the score. (Jonah, high school principal)

Student test scores are also incorporated into principal evaluations. Derreck, a high school principal spoke of how he did not let that influence his decisions regarding students.

I would have been labeled as an ineffective principal at my previous school because of low test scores and you know standard 8. But I was comfortable knowing I was going to be a failure on paper if I was doing what I thought was best for kids . . . I couldn't give a rat's ass about test scores.

While participants said that test scores indirectly impact the IEP team's decisions about LRE and educational placement, it was also described in the majority of interviews as a stressful factor in education.

High Stakes Testing

Concern over accountability and high stakes testing was also described as reason for placing students in the regular classroom for the majority or all of their day. For this study, high stakes testing refers to the end-of-grade (EOG) tests that students are required to take in reading, math and science in grades 3-8. It also encompasses the required end-of-course (EOC) tests that high school students are required to take at the end of certain courses. This test grade is figured into the students overall grade and can be a factor in deciding whether or not the student will be promoted to the next grade in 3rd-8th, or receive course credits in high school.

Concerns over testing and accountability surfaced in all four groups of participants. Parents were concerned about what would happen if their child did not pass the EOG because they feared it meant their child would be held back. Sarah, a parent of a son with a learning disability, expressed how the test are unfair, “I think testing is not child-friendly, especially for children with disabilities. I don’t know that it is fair for any child.” Teachers and administrators felt that it was only fair for students to be in the regular setting if they were required to take the same test as everyone else. Mark, a middle school teacher, said “They want all students to take the exact same test and show they can meet the exact same standard. There are state mandated tests in every subject now.” Suzie, an elementary school principal, expressed similar concern in the following:

I hear a lot about Read to Achieve and parents being worried about their child not passing the third-grade test and if they will be held back. It’s important to have core instruction on grade level because at end of the day they are going to be held accountable for it.

Words like “exposure” and “access” were used frequently when referring to students with disabilities and the general education curriculum. The discussion did not mention specific strategies or supports that were put into place once the student was placed in the general education classroom. There was also no mention of how the student’s progress would be monitored in the general education classroom.

Local Policies

Several teachers and principals mentioned local policies and procedures as factors in determining educational placement when the IEP team was considering a self-contained classroom, which constitutes a separate setting on the continuum.

In this county, you cannot just place a student in a self-contained program for MU or AU without going through certain procedures first. . . . have to have several meetings and a couple different people in on those meetings before we can make that placement. I understand you do not want to rush placement . . . but sometimes it creates a waiting process where a student is in limbo because they are not really being served in one program because they are waiting for the other program because we are waiting for approval from the outside. (Jimmy, a high school assistant principal)

Students can only be placed in these classrooms if someone from the district office approves the placement. Participants described this decision-making process as “not really an IEP team decision.”

IDEA

Participants that mentioned the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) did so in a positive manner. Teachers described it as a factor in determining LRE in that it has caused them to consider inclusion more than they did in the past. They also shared that they feel as if the expectation for inclusion is greater at the local, state and national levels

due to the requirements in the IDEA. Jewel, mother of a child with an intellectual disability, shared a personal experience about how it has opened more doors for students with disabilities,

I think IDEA has caused more kids to be in the regular class. I went to school with a child who had a sister with Down Syndrome and she was institutionalized. It was the early 70s . . . not that long ago. I think of how accepted our children are . . . a lot of it has to do with IDEA and other children growing up with SWD in their classrooms and making friendships and seeing them as people. I don't think it would have happened in this short of amount of time without the law.

High Demands on Teachers

Both teachers and parents cited high demands on teachers as having an impact on determining LRE. This was not mentioned by principals or assistant principals. Felicia, a parent of a child with an emotional disability, said that while it has never been stated in a meeting as a reason, she could see how it might influence a teacher.

We have lost a lot of good teachers because of requiring more and not paying enough. They work around the clock on paperwork. I can see why they might say well . . . I don't want that kid in my class. My bucket is full right now. This might cause the EC teacher to request less service time based on their workload and not the child's needs. (Felicia, parent of four children with disabilities)

Likewise, a special education teacher admitted that while she would never voice it in an IEP meeting, she has been in meetings where she was worried about adding another child to her caseload.

I mean I would never voice this but sometimes I am in a meeting and I know numbers of how many kids are in our program . . . and I think please don't be separate setting. I would never say that out loud and if he is, he is added to the self-contained classroom we will make room. Even if it is considered it doesn't

mean it is used. As in, we have these kids and we have these resources . . . how do we get it? How do we make it happen?

Expectations of “Higher Ups”

Teachers, including special and general education, mentioned expectations of “higher ups” for them to place students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms for most or all of the school day. When asked to expand on who they were referring to as “higher-ups” the responses included the state department and their district office. Sabrina, a special education teacher shared, “It is frowned upon to take a kid out of the regular education classroom by higher ups like people at the state department.”

Another special education teacher shared that there have been times when the IEP team decided that the student would be taught in a co-taught class even though they were not sure that truly was the least restrictive environment.

Certainly our central office staff was saying these students should be in a co-taught classroom and we were still feeling that there were a handful of students that we really didn’t think were ready for a co-taught classroom. (Paula, special education teacher)

While the team felt that the student needed to be taught in an EC classroom for part of their day, it was not the decision based on what they knew the district expected.

A general education teacher stated that the IEP team made decisions about LRE based partly on expectations from the district and state level. “We hear from the district and state level about how all kids have to meet certain standards, so they should be in the regular classroom. It is what they expect from us.” While no participants spoke of a directive from their district or state office regarding the educational placement of students

with disabilities in the regular classroom, they shared that they felt like it was expected and so they complied.

Summary

In this chapter, the findings of the study were reported. In the next chapter, the findings will be discussed and implications for the field are offered, along with recommendations for practice and further research. These implications, recommendations and considerations were based on what emerged from the data and are organized into five themes.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. First, the purpose and guiding questions are reviewed along with the five themes that emerged throughout the course of the study. Then, implications for the field and recommendations for practice and further research are offered. The purpose of this study was to explore how Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams determine the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities. More specifically, the study investigated the criteria IEP Teams use to make decisions about LRE. The following research questions guided the investigation:

- How do IEP Team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when they make decisions regarding a student's individualized education plan?
- How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?
- How do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?
- What outside factors and influences (if any) do IEP Team members consider when they determine LRE and Educational Placement?

These research questions were developed as part of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.3), a review of the literature, and my experiences in the field of special education.

In the remainder of this chapter, I share my findings, interpretations, and new understandings that came about as a result of this study. These are based on what IEP Team members shared with me about how they determine LRE. After a thorough analysis of the data, five themes emerged about how IEP Teams determine least restrictive environment. These are illustrated in Figure 9.

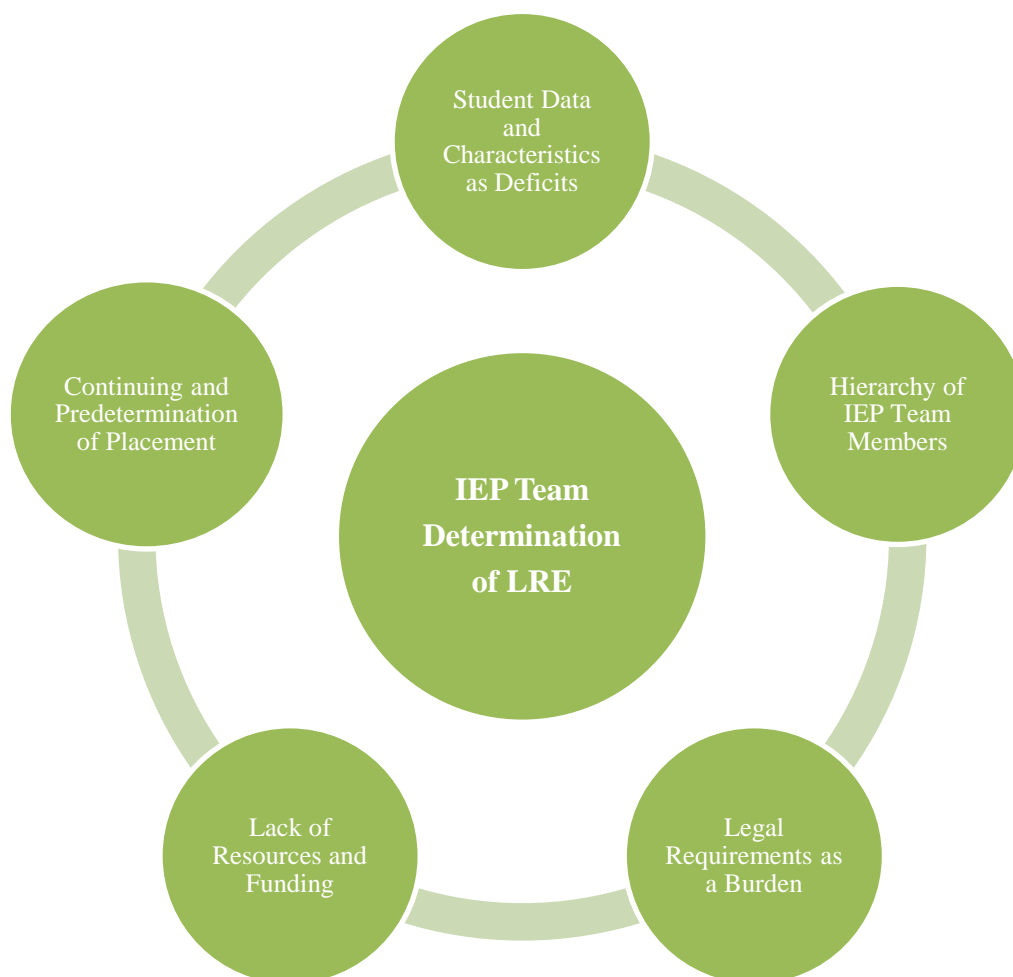


Figure 9. Emerging Themes about LRE Determination.

These five themes are used to organize the remainder of this chapter. Within each theme, I discuss implications of the study along with recommendations for practice and additional research.

Student Data and Characteristics as Deficits

Student data and characteristics were cited throughout the study as determining factors of LRE. A student's disability area, academic skill levels, and accommodations/modifications needed were the most commonly mentioned characteristics. These characteristics were discussed as deficits and barriers preventing the student from obtaining a sense of normalcy. Although the deficits did not always prevent the IEP Team from determining that the student would be taught in the general education classroom, they were frequently discussed as reasons why the student may never be successful, regardless of the setting. These characteristics were also given as reasons why a particular student should not be taught in the general education classroom but had to be due to legal requirements.

Many participants across all four groups described LRE as the place where the student could feel or be the most normal. These statements demonstrate the belief that a person with a disability is not normal. This idea of viewing disability as a deficit, and not the norm, can be explained through the lens of Critical Disability Theory. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is based on seven elements, which are depicted in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Seven Elements of Critical Disability Theory (CDT).

Critical disability theory is an evolving theoretical framework for the study and analysis of disability issues. It arose from critical theory which began in the 1930s (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Critical disability theory seeks to unpack disability in terms of knowledge and power and challenges the notion that categories of “disabled” and “non-disabled” should even exist (Watson, 2012).

As depicted in Figure 10, there are seven elements to Critical Disability Theory: the social model of disability, multidimensionality, valuing diversity, rights, voices of disability, language, and transformative politics (Hosking, 2008, p. 5). I draw specifically from the social model of disability to help explain why participants view student data and characteristics as deficits, and how those with the most power in the decision-making process are people without disabilities who perpetuate the idea of normalcy.

Social Model of Disability

Critical disability theory embraces a version of the social model based on the following principles:

- (1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment,
- (2) disability is best characterized as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment and the social environment, and
- (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional, and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of normalcy. (Hosking, 2008, p. 7)

The IEP Team determines where a student with a disability will be educated. This decision is made for the student, often without his or her input. A person with a disability will likely not match the social expectation of normalcy that is widely accepted by the IEP Team members who are typically not disabled. The level of the mismatch will be more or less drastic depending on the nature and severity of the disability. As a result, the IEP team may decide to change the child's educational placement instead of altering the current environment to meet the student's needs. Furthermore, this decision making power only exists with regards to students with disabilities. Students who are not labeled

as disabled, and have no IEP, are automatically taught in the regular classroom with their non-disabled peers.

This has the potential to create socially unjust classrooms and schools where students with disabilities have little or no input and influence on where they are educated and are not viewed as valuable members of the learning environment. While there has been a rise in the numbers of students with disabilities being taught in the general education classroom, that does not mean they are welcomed or meaningfully included in that setting. Many IEP Team members cite legal requirements as a reason for determining educational placement and LRE, not their belief that the child with a disability should be in the general education classroom. Also, physically placing a child into a general education classroom does not guarantee they are participating fully or that they will be accepted by their teachers and non-disabled peers.

The goal of critical disability theory is to “challenge assumptions so that persons with disabilities can more fully participate in society” (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p. 2). These assumptions include the belief that disability is a misfortune, and that society privileges normalcy over the abnormal. A major tenet of critical disability theory lies in the arena of politics where those without disabilities have power over those with persons with disabilities.

The concept of socially-constructed disabilities, and how people without disabilities perceive disabilities as deficits, is a well-researched phenomenon. Smith (2012) conducted a study to examine how adults who are deaf are perceived and how they respond to teacher expectations in higher education. Smith interviewed students who

are deaf, teachers and administrators. The student's deafness was perceived as a barrier to their being able to successfully complete the course, and resulted in low expectation from teachers and administrators. This epitomizes the social components of critical disability theory and the social disadvantage people with disabilities experience when the institutional environment fails to meet their needs, or denies them access because they do not meet the social expectations of normalcy. The social construction of normalcy also fosters the low expectations that teachers have for students with disabilities. This mirrors a concern I have based on the results of my study, where teachers did not share how they meet the individual needs of students with disabilities in the classroom, only that they know the students are required to be in their classroom. This has serious implications for how school districts provide FAPE for students with disabilities if they are limiting their view of inclusion to a physical location.

The paradigm shift in disability studies, from a medical to a social model, has resulted in disability research becoming a matter of social justice and human rights (Mertens, Bledsoe, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2010). This transformation also provides researchers with a sociocultural basis for the oppression and exclusion of persons with disabilities. Kearney (2009) conducted a study in New Zealand to explore why students with disabilities were still being excluded from and within their neighborhood schools in spite of legislation guaranteeing their right to inclusion. Her findings are analyzed and interpreted through the lens of critical disability theory as she claims that the exclusion of these students violates their legal and human rights. Ultimately she calls for more inclusive schools, and claims that this will only be fully realized when students live in

communities that value human variance and diversity. In my study, the issue was not that students with disabilities were being excluded from their neighborhood schools or general education classrooms. The issue is that the students with disabilities were being taught in the general education classroom because the teachers felt obligated to do so due to legal requirements and expectations at the building and district level.

Critical disability theory asserts that society's expectation for normalcy places people with disabilities at a disadvantage due to the environment that fails to meet their needs. It demands that we reconfigure our notions of disability to value diversity in order for people with disabilities to not be excluded and denied the same rights automatically afforded to others without disability labels. This theory should also be used to examine how IEP Teams decide that the LRE for a particular student is the general education classroom, but then there are no changes made to that classroom to ensure the environment meets the individualized needs of that student. It is not sufficient to only discuss where the student will be taught. The IEP Team must also discuss how the student will be taught.

Schools and districts have a duty to educate teachers and staff about how their own values and beliefs about "normalcy" and disabilities influences how they interact with, teach and make decisions about students with disabilities. This education and understanding may be through the use of Critical Disability Theory or another means. Schools and district leaders should also provide students with disabilities, along with their families, opportunities to better understand their own disabilities and how to advocate in IEP Meetings and across school and community settings.

Hierarchy of IEP Team Members

By federal law the IEP Team must include the student's parent or guardian, the student (when appropriate), a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency (typically the school's principal or assistant principal), and someone who can interpret any evaluation results (Yell, 2012).

During the course of this study, it became apparent that a hierarchy exists regarding IEP Team members and their roles in determining LRE. This is based on how participants perceived the roles of the four IEP Team members represented in this study. Across all participant groups, common descriptions and categories materialized. These are depicted in Figure 11.

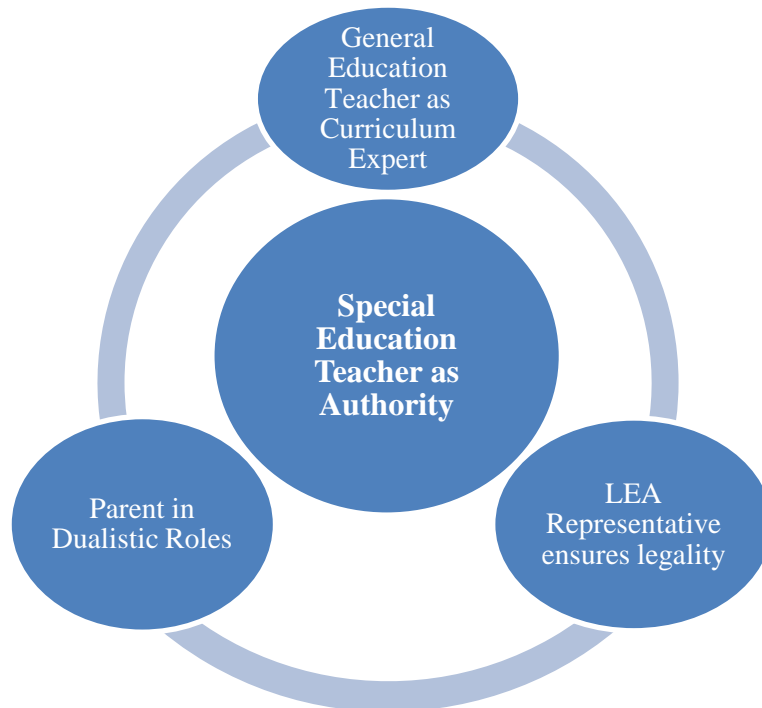


Figure 11. Perceived Roles of IEP Team Members.

Special Education Teacher as Authority

In Figure 11, the circle labeled “Special Education Teacher as Authority” is in the center of the diagram and much larger than the circles labeled as General Education Teacher, LEA Representative and Parent. This is due to how the Special education teacher’s role has a greater impact in determining LRE for students with disabilities. The other members seemed to have equal power in the decision-making process, but the special education teacher had the most power and ultimately the most influence. This concept of being in a position of authority with regards to making decisions about LRE was evident across all participant groups, including how special education teachers perceived themselves. Participants typically described the special education teacher as “carrying a lot of weight” and being the one whom “has the final say” in IEP Meetings.

The special education teacher was also described as being the expert with regards to the student, the disability, and special education programming. While it is reasonable to concede that the special education teacher has more expertise in those areas, it was disconcerting to hear repeatedly that ultimately it was up to the special education teacher to determine LRE and where a student with a disability would be taught. Even more alarming was how participants did not view this power as a problem or as obstructing the IEP Team process.

The IDEA requires that LRE and educational placement be determined in the context of an IEP meeting by an IEP Team, not by one person (Yell, 2012). This team concept views the process as a democracy, not an autocracy. IEP meetings, when functioning democratically, provide an opportunity for parents, teachers and other team

members to discuss the student's special educational needs and offer input in the decisions regarding the program and services that the student will receive. When decisions are made unilaterally by the special education teacher, it circumvents the process which was designed to protect the best interests of students with disabilities and ensure the provision of FAPE. Additional research is needed to further explore the pervasiveness of the concept of special education teacher as authority.

While these ideals about the perceived roles of IEP Team Members were evident in this study, these perceptions may not hold true in all circumstances and practice. For instance, if a teacher is a first year special education teacher, or lateral entry teacher⁶, they may not be perceived as having an authoritative role in the decision-making process. I am unable to address this in my findings, as none of my participants were first-year teachers or lateral entry teachers. Additional research is needed to determine at what point in a special education teacher's career the status of "authority" in the IEP Team meeting is established.

The notion that a hierarchy exists among IEP Team members elicited my own intensive self-reflection as a researcher and former special education teacher. I was not expecting to find this going into my study, thus unprepared for the comments about this area and the emergence of this theme. This theme, and the participants responses that

⁶ Lateral entry is an "alternate" route to teaching for qualified individuals outside of the public education system. Lateral entry allows qualified individuals to obtain a teaching position and begin teaching right away, while obtaining a professional educator's license as they teach. The NC Dept of Public Instruction authorizes lateral entry professional educator's licenses on a provisional basis in licensure areas that correspond to the individual's academic study. The individual is hired by a school system, which recommends the individual to the NC Department of Public Instruction for a lateral entry professional educator's license. The individual is issued a three year lateral entry provisional professional educator's license. Information obtained from: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/licensure/lateral/>

developed this theme, further reifies how disability is an area where privilege and power comes into play. The very labeling of a student with a disability is disempowering to them and their family. I always felt that as a special education teacher I made decisions for students with disabilities with their best interests in mind. But that is the point. It was I who made the decisions much of the time. My fear is that I, like the participants, made these decisions effortlessly and without fully involving all IEP Team members. Sure, parents and students were involved by being physically present and signing the forms. Also, I made tremendous efforts to involve them and make them feel included in the process. While I did not fully realize it at the time, it would currently be naïve of me to claim that the bulk of the decision making power did not go to me, the special education teacher.

Another major tenet of critical disability theory (CDT) involves the voices of people with disabilities. This concept of CDT recognizes that if one believes that disability is a deficiency and incapacity, then the voices of people with disabilities can and will be interpreted in the same manner (Hosking, 2008). Titchkosky (2003) expands on this idea of voice by claiming that when the disabled voice says what the non-disabled person wants to hear, it is accepted. However, when the disabled voice says something that does not match the perspective of the non-disabled voice, it is simply dismissed and deemed as an inappropriate response due to that person's incapacity to make a healthy and appropriate response. This concept was evident in my study as special education teachers were viewed as the ones with the most knowledge and power in the decision-making process. If the student with a disability, or their parent/guardian, agreed with the

teacher's opinions about LRE and educational placement they were viewed in a positive manner. If they opposed or questioned the teacher's opinion, they were often viewed as difficult and uninformed. Also, many times students were not included in the IEP Meeting which prevented their voice from being heard altogether.

A major goal of special education is not to give students a voice. They already have a voice. The goal lies in creating a school where their voice is heard, and more importantly, valued. This includes hearing the voices of students with disabilities, and their parents, even when it does not mirror our own perspectives. We project our own ideas, values, and beliefs onto the students we serve, and this is exacerbated regarding students with disabilities. As with other marginalized groups, we assume them to be inferior in their decision making abilities because they are measured with a ruler of norms we have established based on those not bearing the label of disability.

Each IEP Team member will have his/her own areas of expertise that foster the spirit of IDEA's requirement of the team process. This was evident in my study as the LEA Representative was viewed as making sure the IEP meeting were legal and providing a "big picture" perspective. General Education teachers were viewed as experts about the curriculum and school routines and activities. What was missing in the data collected in this study was the idea that each IEP Team member has a contribution that is viewed equally. Each member had a perceived role, but not an equal part in the decision-making process. As a result, special education teachers were accustomed to making the decision about LRE and did so effortlessly. As one special education teacher put it, "it is like tying a shoe, I don't really think about it." It did not appear that special education

teachers sought out this authoritative role, but it was given to them and they felt obligated to meet the expectations therein.

This has serious implications for practitioners in special education. IEP Team members must find ways to ensure that all team members are actively engaged and participating in the process. My recommendation for practice to address this issue includes a two-tiered approach. The first tier involves a needs assessment within a school building. This could be a simple survey to be completed by IEP team members including general education teachers, special education teachers, LEA Representatives, students with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. The survey should be confidential so that participants feel comfortable being open and honest in their responses. Survey responses will provide data to be used to assess the needs within that school and pinpoint areas to increase involvement of all IEP Team members and ensure parity among the team.

The second tier of the approach to help address the issue of special education teacher as authority includes professional development for IEP Team members about the IEP process, coupled with strategies to increase participation of all IEP Team members. This needs to be tailored to the results of the survey and needs assessment conducted for a particular school as each school within a district may have different areas of strengths and varying opportunities for growth. One strategy could be as simple as implementing a checklist or reflective guide to be utilized in every IEP meeting. This needs to be deliberate in that the team would go through a series of reflective questions to help ensure all members are participating and feel like a valuable contributor to the IEP meeting. The

Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR) has a multitude of resources and strategies for increasing participation among all IEP members and can be found at <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/>. It would also benefit IEP Teams to review court cases on LRE as they provide guiding principles and real-life scenarios.

Parents in Dualistic Roles

Within the theme, Hierarchy of IEP Team Members, a second subtheme arose regarding how school based participants view parents in dualistic roles. This binary placed parents as “pushy” or “not involved at all.” While school-based participants consistently expressed how they wanted parents to be more involved, they often described parents who were more involved in IEP meetings as “over the top” or having “just enough information to be dangerous.” While not all school-based participants described them in this manner, it occurred frequently enough to include it as a theme of the study as it has serious implications for IEP Teams if they are truly operating under the concept of team as required by the IDEA.

Parents expressed worry about coming off as “pushy” in an IEP Meeting, so they put much effort into being careful how made requests and said they felt they must “pick their battles.” Several parents shared that they had additional concerns or requests regarding their child’s IEP, but did not mention them in the meeting for fear of jeopardizing their relationship with the teachers and principal. Parents seemed to know that they were viewed as pushy by teachers and LEA representatives when they made requests for their child. As a result they took precaution to avoid this reputation for fear that it could ultimately have a negative impact on their child’s education.

Parents are, and always have been, members of the IEP Team (Wright et al., 2010). Furthermore the IDEA's safeguards are designed to make parents and school officials equal partners in the education of students with disabilities, and requires school officials to work with parents to develop IEPs (Osborne & Russo, 2007). The primacy of this IDEA requirement makes this finding of dualistic view of parents especially important as it is apparent that many school officials still do not view parents as equal partners in the IEP process. This also makes it highly unlikely that parents play a meaningful role in determining LRE for their child.

This dualistic view of parents has negative implications for schools if not addressed as it polarizes the IEP Team and impedes the team process. Parents must feel safe to express their views without fear of negative repercussion for their child. Building trust among IEP Team members is critical if they are to work together to make decisions about students with disabilities. Surveying, or having conversations with stakeholders, will determine areas of need for which to then create meaningful professional development opportunities for IEP Team members to safeguard active and meaningful team participation. In addition, schools should create opportunities for parents to learn more about special education and advocacy while also building a network with each other.

Legal Requirements as a Burden

Participants consistently shared their belief that students with disabilities are being taught in the regular education classroom for all or the majority of their due to legal requirements and expectations at the local, state and national level. While students were

not always described in a negative manner, the legal requirements were described as if they are a burden. High stakes testing, highly qualified status, and teacher/principal evaluations were all named as burdens and viewed negatively by all participants.

High stakes testing refer to state mandated tests that students take at the end of grades 3-8 and in certain high school courses. These test scores are used to evaluate the teacher and principal. As a result, the teachers and principals feel a great deal of pressure to increase scores and ensure that all of their students received passing scores. Due to this, some IEP Team members feel that all students with disabilities should be taught in the regular education classroom so they receive the same instruction in the content areas as other students. Other IEP Team members wanted students with disabilities to be taught in the special education classroom because they feared the students would not score proficiently, thus reflecting negatively on them as a teacher. Either scenario is alarming as they both use test scores and teacher/principal evaluations as criteria for determining LRE, not the individualized needs of the students with disabilities.

Requirements at the national, state and local level were described as one reason why there has been an increase in students with disabilities being taught in the general education classroom. School-based participants did not always complain about having to teach the students with disabilities, but they did complain about how they had to follow certain requirements in order to do so. For example, several participants expressed frustration about having to get permission from someone at the district office to provide a particular service or give a student access to a specific class or program. Participants viewed these requirements as a burden and did not find them helpful when determining

LRE. They described these district-level requirements as impeding the IEP process and at times preventing the child from getting access to the services and programs they needed.

Throughout the study, there was copious discussion about how there are more inclusion and co-taught classrooms due to legal requirements, but no dialogue of how it has changed participants' belief system, pedagogy or instructional practices. What was missing in my study was the discourse about how schools are changing their methods and pedagogies due to the changes in their classroom rosters. Several general education teachers indicated that it really hasn't changed how they teach because they have a co-teacher who is a special education teacher who makes sure the students with disabilities "get what they need." What was missing was a sense of shared ownership in teaching students with disabilities. Also, there was no conversation about how they are monitoring a student's educational benefit in the general education classroom. This has serious implications as it is not advantageous to just physically place a student with a disability in the classroom. There should be evidence to indicate whether that educational placement is producing educational benefit. A paradigm shift must occur in teachers regarding how their instruction is adjusted to meet the needs of all learners and I did not find evidence of this across participant groups.

As I interviewed participants and analyzed the data, several questions kept surfacing in my thoughts and memos:

- The demographics of classrooms have changed due to the increase in including students with disabilities, but have instructional practices?

- Have teachers been equipped to provide instruction that ensures all learners are accessing the curriculum?
- Have students who were once taught primarily in a special education classroom, and now primarily in the general education classroom, been prepared for such a shift?
- Do the families of students with disabilities understand inclusion and co-teaching?

These are all areas that need additional exploration and research in order to determine if the shift towards serving students with disabilities in the general education classroom is still providing FAPE.

Throughout this study, I did not find evidence that teachers had transformed their practice due to now having more students with disabilities in the general education classroom. While the IDEA does provide a preference for educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom, it is not required (Yell, 2012). The IDEA does not address the instructional practices of teachers or their attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. Both of these areas fall within the boundaries of a school's culture which is shaped by the principal. This has significant implications for educational leaders as they are charged with setting expectations within their school and transforming the cultures of their schools when needed to ensure that all students are afforded a socially just school. In other words, principals have to ask the question, *“Do we want to teach students with disabilities in the general education classroom because of legal requirements, or because we believe all children with disabilities have the right to be*

included and have access to the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers?” The answer to that question will ultimately determine if a school will view inclusion as a burden, or an opportunity to transform their school into a place where everyone can learn and contribute.

Lack of Resources and Funding

Although participants adamantly stated that resources and funding were never discussed in an IEP meeting or used as a reason in meetings to determine LRE, this was consistently described to be a problem by all school-based participants. While participants did not want the lack of resources and funding to be part of the decision-making process in IEP meetings, they saw no way around it. This created a tension between making decisions based on availability of resources, and making decisions based on individual student needs. This was often described as an overarching issue in schools and not specifically tied to special education or LRE.

All participant groups aspired for more options for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. They claimed that a lack of resources and funding limited their options for serving students with disabilities, and ultimately impacted how they determined LRE. Teachers, principals and assistant principals wanted more special education teachers so they could provide more co-taught classrooms. For example, most only offer co-taught English and math but would provide science and social studies if they had the resources and positions. This would allow them to provide more supports in all four content areas.

In my 18 years in the field of special education, I have yet to hear school employees complain about having more resources and funding than they can possibly

use. On the contrary, I have been part of discussions where teachers and educational leaders want to provide more for students with disabilities, but each fiscal year school districts often have to operate with less resources and funding than the previous year.

This theme, a lack of resources and funding, did not come as a surprise to me as I have witnessed it first hand and substantiated it in my review of the literature (Kluth et al., 2002; Weatherly, 2007). In spite of limits and reductions in resources and funding, making decisions about LRE based on cost of the availability of resources is not within the legal bounds of the LRE mandate. School districts cannot use a lack of adequate resources or personnel as a reason for failing to provide students with disabilities a FAPE in the LRE (Kluth et al., 2002). While IEP Team members in my study understood that they cannot use this as a reason to not provide FAPE, it still creates a conundrum for the local education agency. As some participants put it, not having what they need to provide FAPE is like the “elephant in the room” in IEP meetings because while it is a factor in how the IEP Team determines LRE, the IEP Team cannot use it as a reason. Many said they would have provided more services or service time, but they knew it was not available because of the cost and therefore did not bring it up in the meeting.

While teachers and administrators should be applauded for their efforts to offer the best education possible, this is not required by the IDEA. The U.S. court of Appeals for the Third Circuit based its ruling in *Doe V. Board of Education of Tullahoma City* (1993) on the premise that school districts are required to provide the educational equivalent of a serviceable Chevrolet to students with disabilities, not a Cadillac (Yell, 2012). While this metaphor used by the court, and cited in cases since then, may seem

unethical, it can help teachers and educational leaders keep things in perspective when making decisions about FAPE and LRE.

School districts are not responsible for creating the best possible education for students with disabilities, only one that is appropriate. IEP Team members must be able to demonstrate that a child's education is appropriate. The courts and the IDEA have defined appropriate as an education that provides educational benefit (McLaughlin, 2009). The burden of proof for evidence of this educational benefit falls on the school district. For this reason, it is critical that teachers and school staff have a system for monitoring a student's progress through some type of systematic data collection. This data will then serve as a basis for determining LRE. If there is no evidence, then the IEP Team is more likely to make decisions that are nebulous and supported only by their assumptions and beliefs.

Decisions about LRE that are grounded in data help the school ascertain that they are meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This also helps defend decisions should they be contested or litigated. In both *Oberti v. Board* (1993) and *The Ninth Circuit in Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H.* (1994), the courts ruled on the side of the parent because the school district lacked sufficient evidence to support its decision about LRE and educational placement.

This idea of measuring and documenting a student's progress can also be applied to the example where a teacher voiced how she wished her school could offer co-taught science in addition to co-taught English and math classes. The IEP team should have a method for determining if the student in the regular science class is receiving educational

benefit from the class. If the team decides that the modifications and accommodations, as listed on the IEP, are being provided by the general education teacher alone in that setting and resulting in educational benefit, then the student is receiving FAPE. If the team has data to indicate that the student is not making any gains in the class, then the student is not receiving educational benefit from being in the class. At that point, the team is responsible for making adjustments to the student's IEP so that he or she will receive educational benefit. Consequently, if the team has no data to indicate whether a child is receiving educational benefit then they are unable to determine FAPE and make justifiable decisions about LRE.

Another example of limited resources as voiced by participants included large class sizes. Several participants expressed how they believe a child would receive a better education if there were fewer students in the classroom. While this may be true, it does not mean that the student is not receiving educational benefit in the larger classroom. Having data to support or refute educational benefit is critical in determining LRE. It is also important to note that large class sizes are pervasive across education and not entirely a special education issue.

Teachers and educational leaders, along with students with disabilities and their families, must seek out ways to advocate and lobby for increased funding at the local, state and national levels. While this may seem like an impossible feat, it does have the potential to make a difference. Regardless, teachers and educational leaders need guidance in making legal and socially just decisions about LRE in spite of limited resources and funding. This guidance must include strategies for using resources wisely

and methods for monitoring a student's progress in order to determine educational benefit.

Continuing and Predetermination of Placement

In the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, Congress added a provision based on the majority of case law that addresses predetermination of placement. It states that a hearing officer may find that a child did not receive FAPE if procedural inadequacies “significantly impeded the parents’ opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding the provision of a free appropriate public education to the parents’ child” (20 U.S.C. §1415(f)(3)(E) (ii)). Predetermination occurs when the school staff makes a decision prior to the IEP Meeting about how and/or where a child with a disability will be educated, and then do not consider input from the student or the parent/guardian during the meeting (Martin, J., 2009). For this study, I group continuing the placement with predetermination of placement, because participants indicated that continuing the previous placement was the most common example of how they often predetermined a child’s placement before an IEP meeting.

In *Deal v. Hamilton County Board of Education* (2004), the court ruled that the school had pre-decided the placement and methodology to be used for Zachary, a student with Autism. Zachary’s parents requested a one-on-one program using Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). The court determined that the school system had an unofficial policy of refusing to consider ABA requests and did not go into the meeting with an “open mind.” The court also noted evidence of staff statements to the effect that they would personally

like to provide ABA programming to Zachary but could not do so within the school system's constraints (Martin, 2009).

Across all participant areas, continuing and predetermination of placement surfaced as a theme. School-based participants viewed it as part of the process, but several parents viewed it as prohibiting their participation in the decision-making process. It was obvious to parents when decisions had been made prior to the IEP meeting. Paperwork completed prior to the meeting and special education teachers stating during the meeting that a particular decision would be "best for the child" were described by parents as indicators that the team, or a member of the team, had predetermined the child's educational placement. This did not come as a surprise to me as it was cited in the literature as a determining factor in how IEP Teams determine LRE and educational placement (Weatherly, 2007; Rozalski et al., 2010).

Making decisions outside of the context of an IEP meeting, or simply continuing the current placement without meaningful discussion in the meeting, has substantial implications for IEP Teams and LRE as it bypasses the concept of IEP Team as required by the IDEA. A student's current placement, whether it is in the special education or general education classroom, should not occur without sufficient evidence to demonstrate that placement is resulting in educational benefit for the student. In both *Oberti v. Board* (1993) and *The Ninth Circuit in Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H.* (1994), the courts ruled on the side of the parent because the school district lacked sufficient evidence to support their decision about LRE and educational placement. The school districts were continuing the child in a special

education classroom, which was contested by the parents. Because the burden of proof falls on the district, not the parent, the district must be able to substantiate their decision. Continuing a child's educational placement within the context of an IEP meeting is appropriate, if the school has evidence to show the student is receiving educational benefit. However, it is never acceptable for IEP Team members to predetermine LRE and educational placement as that prevents all IEP Team members from being able to participate in the decision-making process.

Recommendations for schools and school districts include developing and maintaining a system for collecting data to determine if the child's current placement is providing FAPE, including educational benefit. To avoid predetermination of placement, strategies must be in place to ensure all members are participating in the IEP decision-making process as required by the IDEA. IEP Team members can also look to court cases for guidance and examples of procedural pitfalls to avoid.

Summary of Implications and Recommendations

In the previous sections of this chapter, I provided implications and recommendations within each of the five themes that emerged during this study. In Table 8, I provide a summary of my study's implications and recommendations. It is my hope that not only IEP Team members, but also policy makers, teacher education programs and community members looking for ways to improve educational programming for students with disabilities, will consider these recommendations for practice and further research. While we have come a long way from a time when many students with disabilities were denied the opportunity to attend school, we still have a ways to go.

Table 8

Implications and Recommendations

Emerging Theme	Implications for the Field	Recommendations for Practice and Further Research
Student Data and Characteristics as Deficits	Idea of “normalcy” and viewing those with disabilities as having deficits influence opportunities afforded to students with disabilities	Educate teachers and staff about how their own values and beliefs about “normalcy” and disabilities influences how they interact with, teach and make decisions about students with disabilities
	Those in positions of decision making power are considered “normal” therefore measuring others by their own sense of normalcy	Provide opportunities for students with disabilities to better understand their own disability and how to advocate in IEP Meetings and across school/community settings
Hierarchy of IEP Team Members	Special Education teachers seen as authority which impedes the IEP Team process	Survey stakeholders to determine areas of need and create meaningful professional development opportunities for IEP Team members to safeguard active and meaningful team participation
	Parents perceived in dualistic roles which polarizes the team and fosters an “us vs. them” mentality	Create opportunities for parents to learn more about special education and advocacy while building a network with each other within the school community
Legal Requirements as a Burden	Lack of understanding among IEP Team members regarding the how and why of inclusive education	Develop school cultures where all stakeholders understand the purpose of inclusive schooling, not just the legal requirements and expectations
	Lack of transformation in pedagogy to meet the individual needs of learners now that classroom demographics have changed and expectations are higher for all learners	Ensure teachers have the skills necessary to differentiate for all learners to make sure they are accessing the learning environment. This will require a needs assessment followed by meaningful and differentiated professional development offerings
Limited Resources and Funding	IEP Teams may make decisions based on resources and funding, instead of the individualized needs of the student with a disability	Research and develop strategies for using resources wisely
	Critical that IEP Teams understand the importance of monitoring a student’s progress in order to show evidence of educational benefit	Advocate for increased funding and resources at the state and federal levels Professional development opportunities and ongoing support for progress monitoring

Table 8

(Cont.)

Emerging Theme	Implications for the Field	Recommendations for Practice and Further Research
Continuing and Predetermination of Placement	Continuing a child's educational placement within the context of an IEP meeting is appropriate, only when the school has evidence to show the student is receiving educational benefit in that placement	Develop and maintain a system for collecting data to determine if the child's current placement is providing FAPE, including educational benefit
	Predetermination of placement is never appropriate as it prevents all IEP Team members from being able to participate in the decision-making process	Develop and maintain strategies to ensure all members are participating in the IEP decision-making process as required by the IDEA Look to court cases for guidance and examples of procedural pitfalls to avoid

At the End of the Day . . .

My journey to gain a better understanding of how IEP Teams determine least restrictive environment and educational placement allowed me to develop implications for the field along with recommendations for practice and further research. While some of the information gleaned throughout the course of this study was surprising, and even disheartening, much of it was also inspiring. The participants were eager to participate in the study, many of them thanking me for the opportunity to reflect on their practice which is so often not part of their routine. I left every interview feeling that the participant not only cared about children but wanted them to be successful and happy at school. However, there are still glaring issues that need to be addressed.

IEP teams are charged with making decisions that are based on a child's individualized needs. These needs involve data and characteristics that should not be viewed as deficits, but as part of what makes the child special. Legal requirements and a

lack of resources will never cease to exist. In spite of this IEP Team members can work together to create appropriate plans and programs that will afford all children with educational benefit. In order to achieve this IEP Teams cannot operate under a hierarchy, but under the belief that all members are equal and have voices worthy of being heard. This will also foster an open-minded IEP Team that makes decisions in a spirit of democracy without predeterminations or preconceived notions.

This study reveals how easy it can be for IEP Team members to focus on outside factors and lose sight of the fact that they are in the powerful position of making life-altering decisions for somebody else's child. It is critical that IEP Team members not let the stress of the job cause them to see educating students with disabilities as a burden. As a parent of a child with a disability put it, "*at the end of the day they are still someone's child.*" Another parent spoke of her child as a gift, not a burden:

For us she is a gift. She fights with her sisters like any other girl. She loves Taylor Swift and whatever teenagers like. She is GiGi first and for us and I am thankful for all of the teachers and therapists and all of those people who have helped us learn how to help her and help her to be the best she can be. And, when I say that I don't mean it in a demeaning way. I say that in the same way that I say that about my other three children. I want them to have the best life they can and I truly believe she will be taking care of me in my old age (laughs) and she is going to do well and she is going to work and do great things in her life and be able to do all those things she wants to do. I had a doctor tell me when she was born that she will walk, she will talk, she will run, she will do all the things that your other kids do, she is just going to stop and smell the roses along the way. And, that has totally shaped . . . that is totally what she does. She does it her way but she gets there and she gets where she needs to be. (Jewel, parent of a child with Down Syndrome)

At the end of the day, IEP Teams cannot allow the pressures they feel due to legal requirements and a lack of resources to have a negative impact on how they meet the

needs of children with disabilities. Our own ideas of normalcy cannot allow us to view students with disabilities as deficient. Perhaps students with disabilities are doing things in a different way and on a different timeline. Different does not equate to deficient. We cannot lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day, we are talking about someone's child.

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APPENDIX A

DISABILITY STATISTICS

Disability Area	United States	North Carolina	School District Where Study Occurred
Autism	440,592	17,644	268
Deaf-Blindness	1,281	28	*
Deafness		177	*
Developmental Delay	122,901	14,638	164
Hearing Impairment	68,069	1,823	38
Intellectual Disability-Mild	415,697 (total of all three combined)	11,847	131
Intellectual Disability-Moderate		4,318	36
Intellectual Disability-Severe		778	2
Multiple Disability	124,722	2,770	74
Orthopedic Impairment	52,052	879	17
Other Health Impairment	757,904	35,562	526
Serious Emotional Disability	359,389	5,614	51
Specific Learning Disability	2,268,098	74,495	981
Speech Language Impairment	1,032,729	29,220	423
Traumatic Brain Injury	25,020	511	12
Visual Impairment including Blindness	24,987	669	8
Total	5,693,441	200,973	2,750

*Students with these disabilities have primary disability labels of another area/category. Information obtained from Institute on Disability (2014) and ncpublicschools.org

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF DISABILITY AREAS

Area of Eligibility	Description
Autism (AU)	<p>(i) A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotypical movements, restricted interests, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. This impairment may include: Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (Atypical Autism), Asperger's Disorder, Rett's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder or all Pervasive Developmental Disorders.</p> <p>(ii) Autism does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disability,</p> <p>(iii) A child who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three could be identified as having autism if the criteria in paragraph (i) of this section are satisfied. Sometimes called autism spectrum disorder.</p>
Serious Emotional Disability (SED)	<p>A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:</p> <p>(A) An inability to make educational progress that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.</p> <p>(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.</p> <p>(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.</p> <p>(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.</p> <p>(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.</p> <p>Serious emotional disability includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance under paragraph (b)(5)(i) of this section.</p>
Deafness	<p>Hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification that adversely affects the child's educational performance.</p>

Area of Eligibility	Description
Deaf-blindness	Hearing and visual impairments that occur together, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.
Hearing Impaired (HI)	Impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness in this section. The term "hard of hearing" may be used in this capacity.
Multiple Disabilities (MU)	Two or more disabilities occurring together (such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment, etc.), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities does not include deaf-blindness.
Intellectually Disabled (ID)	Significantly sub average general intellectual functioning that adversely affects a child's educational performance existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period. Includes: Mild (IDMI); Moderate (IDMO); Severe (IDSE; Severe-Profound)
Orthopedically Impaired (OI)	A severe physical impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis, etc.), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures, etc.).
Other Health Impairment (OHI)	Having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that: (i) Is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette's Syndrome, etc.; and(ii) Adversely affects a child's educational performance.
Learning Disabled (LD)	A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the impaired ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of serious

Area of Eligibility	Description
	emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.
Speech-Language Impaired (SI)	(i) A communication disorder, such as impairment in fluency, articulation, language, or voice/resonance that adversely affects a child's educational performance. (ii) Language may include function of language (pragmatic), the content of language (semantic), and the form of language (phonologic, morphologic, and syntactic systems). (iii) A speech or language impairment may result in a primary disability or it may be secondary to other disabilities.
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	An acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Traumatic brain injury applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. Traumatic brain injury does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative, or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.
Developmentally Delayed (DD)	A child ages three through seven, whose development and/or behavior is delayed or atypical, as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the following areas: physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, or adaptive development, and who, by reason of the delay, needs special education and related services.
Visually Impaired including blindness (VI)	An impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness. A visual impairment is the result of a diagnosed ocular or cortical pathology.

Information obtained from *Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities, June 2010*. This and additional information can be found at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ec/>

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS CROSSWALK

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Building Rapport	What is your current role?
	How long have you been teaching/ administration?
	Talk about why you went into education and why you have stayed
	What do you enjoy most about your job (school)?
	What would you change about your job (school)?
	Tell me about your child's disability.
How do IEP Team members interpret the concept of least restrictive environment when making decisions regarding a student's individualized education plan?	In your own words, talk about what least restrictive environment means.
	How does your school meet the needs of students with disabilities?
	Talk about how your teacher education program/ administrative program helped prepare you to teach/ serve students with disabilities
How do IEP Team members perceive their role in determining LRE within the context of the IEP process and meeting?	What part do you play in determining where a student with a disability will be educated?
	Talk about the role each IEP Team member plays in determining LRE.
How do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?	What are the options available at your school for providing services to students with disabilities?
	In what ways does a student's disability category impact where they should be taught?
	To what extent does a student's behavior impact the IEP Team's decision about where they should receive instruction?
	What academic skills would a student need to have in order to be taught in the regular classroom the majority of the day?
	To what extent do the amount and intensity of a student's accommodations and modifications

Research Questions	Interview Questions
	impact the IEP Team's decision about where the student should be taught?
	What characteristics with regards to academics, life skills, and behavior would make it necessary for a student to be taught in the special education classroom the majority of the day?
	To what extent does the IEP Team consider the needs of non-disabled students when determining where to teach a student with a disability?
	What other criteria do you consider when deciding whether or not a student with a disability should be removed from the regular education classroom for part of their school day?
What outside factors and influences (if any) do IEP Team members consider when determining LRE and Educational Placement?	To what extent do IEP Teams consider availability of resources when considering educational placement?
	In what ways, if any, have state and federal mandates such as NCLB and IDEA impacted how IEP Teams determine where a student with a disability should be taught?
	Talk about any other factors you consider when deciding where a student with a disability should be taught.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—PARENT VERSION

Interview Questions*	
Name:	Pseudonym:
Tell me about your child. (Probing questions can include name, age, grade, strengths, and interests).	
In your own words, talk about what least restrictive environment means.	
How does your child's school meet the needs of students with disabilities?	
What part do you play in determining where your child will be educated?	
Talk about the role each IEP Team member plays in determining LRE (Special education teacher, Gen Ed Teacher, Principal)	
Think about the last IEP meeting you participated in. How did the IEP Team members decide where your child should be educated?	
What are the options available at your child's school for providing services to students with disabilities?	
In what ways does a student's disability category impact where they should be taught? (give examples of disability categories)	
Do you think behavior makes an impact on where a student with a disability will be educated? If so, how?	
What academic skills would a student need to have in order to be taught in the regular classroom the majority of the day?	
What characteristics with regards to academics, life skills, physical impairments, and behavior would make it necessary for a student to be taught in the special education classroom the majority of the day?	
To what extent does the IEP Team consider the needs of non-disabled students when determining where to teach a student with a disability?	
What other criteria do you think is considered when deciding whether or not a student with a disability should be removed from the regular education classroom for part of their school day?	
Are there any outside factors and influences that IEP Team members consider when determining LRE and Educational Placement? If so, what are they?	
To what extent do IEP Teams consider availability of resources (funding, number of teachers, space, etc.)	
In what ways, if any, have state and federal mandates such as NCLB and IDEA impacted how IEP Teams determine where a student with a disability should be taught?	
Is there anything else you would like to add or share?	

*This serves as a guide for semi-structured interviews. It is feasible that not all questions will be covered, and/or the participant may bring up items not on this guide. Also, terms and concepts will be explained and/or described in more simple terms as needed.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—TEACHER/ PRINCIPAL VERSION

Interview Questions*
Name:
Pseudonym:
What is your current role? ELA teacher
How long have you been teaching/ administration?
Talk about why you went into education and why you have stayed
What do you enjoy most about your job (school)? Interacting with children and their families and seeing
In your own words, talk about what least restrictive environment means.
How does your school meet the needs of students with disabilities?
Talk about how your teacher education program/ administrative program helped prepare you to teach/ serve students with disabilities.
What part do you play in determining where a student with a disability will be educated?
Talk about the role each IEP Team member plays in determining LRE.
Think about the last IEP meeting you participated in. How did the IEP Team members decide where that student with a disability should be educated?
Generally speaking, how do IEP Team members decide where a student with a disability should be educated?
What are the options available at your school for providing services to students with disabilities?
In what ways does a student's disability category impact where they should be taught?
To what extent does a student's behavior impact the IEP Team's decision about where they should receive instruction?
What academic skills would a student need to have in order to be taught in the regular classroom the majority of the day?
To what extent do the amount and intensity of a student's accommodations and modifications impact the IEP Team's decision about where the student should be taught?
What characteristics with regards to academics, life skills, physical impairments, and behavior would make it necessary for a student to be taught in the special education classroom the majority of the day?
To what extent does the IEP Team consider the needs of non-disabled students when determining where to teach a student with a disability?
What other criteria do you consider when deciding whether or not a student with a disability should be removed from the regular education classroom for part of their school day?

Interview Questions*
Are there any outside factors and influences that IEP Team members consider when determining LRE and Educational Placement? If so, what are they?
To what extent do IEP Teams consider availability of resources when considering educational placement?
In what ways, if any, have state and federal mandates such as NCLB and IDEA impacted how IEP Teams determine where a student with a disability should be taught?
Talk about any other factors you consider when deciding where a student with a disability should be taught.

*This serves as a guide for semi-structured interviews. It is feasible that not all questions will be covered, and/or the participant may bring up items not on this guide.

APPENDIX F

RECRUITMENT DOCUMENT FOR EMAIL CONTACTS

Dear _____,

I am currently working on my Doctorate in Educational Research and Cultural Foundations at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G). For my dissertation, I want to study how IEP Team members determine least restrictive environment (LRE) and educational placement for students with disabilities. In other words, how is it decided where and how a student with a disability will receive instruction? To do this, I would like to interview IEP Team members including special education teachers, general education teachers, LEA Representatives (Principals and/or Assistant Principals), and parents of children with disabilities. I anticipate the interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. This study has been approved by the Office of Research Integrity at UNC-G along with Steve Achey, Director of Accountability, Research, and Evaluation for the Alamance-Burlington School System.

It is my hope that information gleaned from you and other participants may help IEP Teams as they make decisions about students with disabilities regarding least restrictive environment and educational placement.

I am asking you to take part in this study because you have attended IEP meetings and participated in determining LRE. As a small incentive, all participants will be entered into a drawing for one of four gift cards in the amount of \$10. An overview of questions used in the interview will be provided to you as well. If you do not wish to participate in this study, no explanation is needed and there will be no penalty for your decision.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at jibost@uncg.edu or via phone at 336-847-0749 so that we can set up an interview time.

Thank you for your consideration,

Julie I. Bost
jibost@uncg.edu
336-847-0749

APPENDIX G

RECRUITMENT DOCUMENT FOR PHONE CONTACTS

I am currently working on my Doctorate in Educational Research and Cultural Foundations at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G). For my dissertation, I want to study how IEP Team members determine least restrictive environment (LRE) and educational placement for students with disabilities. In other words, how is it decided where and how a student with a disability will receive instruction? To do this, I would like to interview IEP Team members including special education teachers, general education teachers, LEA Representatives (Principals and/or Assistant Principals), and parents of children with disabilities. I anticipate the interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. This study has been approved by the Office of Research Integrity at UNC-G along with Steve Achey, Director of Accountability, Research, and Evaluation for the Alamance-Burlington School System.

It is my hope that information gleaned from you and other participants may help IEP Teams as they make decisions about students with disabilities regarding least restrictive environment and educational placement.

I am asking you to take part in this study because you have attended IEP meetings and participated in determining LRE. As a small incentive, all participants will be entered into a drawing for one of four gift cards in the amount of \$10. An overview of questions used in the interview will be provided to you as well. If you do not wish to participate in this study, no explanation is needed and there will be no penalty for your decision.

Do you have any questions?

Are you interested in participating? (If yes, then schedule a time and location for the interview).

If you need more time to think about your decision, that's fine. You can contact me with questions and/or your decision at jibost@uncg.edu or via phone at 336-847-0749.

Thank you for your consideration.

Good Bye!

APPENDIX H

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: **How IEP Teams Determine Least Restrictive Environment**

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Julie I. Bost, Principal Investigator

Carl Lashley, EdD, Faculty Advisor

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research study. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to explore how IEP Teams determine least restrictive environment (LRE) and educational placement for students with disabilities. In other words, how is it decided where and how a student with a disability will receive instruction?

Why are you asking me?

I am asking you to take part in this study because you have attended IEP meetings and participated in determining LRE. This study includes special education teachers, general education teachers, building level administrators who serve as representative of the local

education agency (LEA Representatives), and parents of children with disabilities. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an individual interview with you (unless you prefer to be interviewed with another person or group which will be accommodated). The interview will include questions about your experiences and background, how IEP Teams determine LRE, and if any outside influences such as mandates and legislation impact decision making. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. I may follow up with you after the interview if I have a question about your response(s) or would like you to expand on your answer(s).

Is there any audio/video recording?

The interview will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy in transcribing your answers. Transcriptions, and any writings related to this study, will use pseudonyms for you, your school, and the school district. On any audio recorded file there is a possibility that voices will be recognized, however these recordings will be password protected and kept in a secure location. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will limit access to the tape as described in this consent form.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. There are no known risks to participants in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

If you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions: The researcher conducting this study is Julie I. Bost. Please ask any questions you have before, during, and after the study. You may contact Julie I. Bost at 336.847.0749, jibost@uncg.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Carl Lashley at 336.334.3745 or carl.lashley@gmail.com. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the **Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at 855.251.2351.**

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

The information gleaned from you and other participants may help IEP Teams as they make decisions about students with disabilities regarding least restrictive environment and educational placement.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study. All participants will be entered into a drawing for one of four \$10 gift cards.

How will you keep my information confidential?

The records of this study will be kept private. Pseudonyms will be used in all written publications or presentations of the data. A master list of all participants' names and their corresponding pseudonyms will be created and kept in a separate document. This document along with all research records will be kept on password protected computers and locked filing cabinets; only the researcher will have access to the records. The master list will be an entirely separate document from the interview data document. This list will be stored completely separate from the data on a completely separate password protected computer and completely separate locked filing cabinet from the interview data. Once interviews are transcribed the list will be destroyed. The audio-tape of your interview will be destroyed once it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or your school district as all answers and level of participation will be kept confidential. If you decide to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigator also has the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped."

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.

APPENDIX I
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



**OFFICE OF RESEARCH
INTEGRITY**

2718 Beverly Cooper Moore
and Irene Mitchell Moore
Humanities and Research
Administration Bldg. PO Box
26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
336.256.0253
Web site: www.uncg.edu/orc
Federalwide Assurance (FWA)
#216

To: Julie Bost
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
40 Windrift Court, Gibsonville, NC 27249

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 2/12/2015

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Exemption Category: 4.Existing data, public or deidentified,2.Survey, interview,
public observation

Study #: 15-0028

Study Title: How Individualized Education Plan Team Members Determine Least
Restrictive Environment and Educational Placement

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt
from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR
46.101(b).

Study Description:

This is a basic qualitative study that seeks to examine how members on an IEP
Team determine where a student with a disability in grades K-12 will be taught.
Data will be collected through interviews of parents of students with disabilities,
general education teachers, special education teachers, and school-based principals
or assistant principals. The interviews will be one-on-one and last about an hour.

Confidentiality of all participants, along with their school and district, will be maintained.

Regulatory and other findings:

- If your study is contingent upon approval from another site (final approval from school district), you will need to submit a modification at the time you receive that approval.

Investigator's Responsibilities

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. Please utilize the most recent and approved version of your consent form/information sheet when enrolling participants. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found At http://policy.uncg.edu/research_data/.

CC:

Carl Lashley, Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found

APPENDIX J

PARTICIPANTS DEFINING OF LRE IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allowing the student to be with typically developing peers as much as possible during the day. - It is the environment where the child learns best . . . where they are going to get the most academics. - I'm not really sure. They never use that term . . . so I don't know how to answer that. - It is to let the child be able to be included as much as possible in a normal setting but yet still work with that child in a one-on-one basis in an EC class as much as necessary or them to get the best educational experience possible. It is a tight-wire balancing act that is very delicate and changes often. - It means you are trying to provide them with a normal setting and not making them feel separated and restricted from the normal classroom.
LEA Reps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preventing isolation or segregation of the child so they can participate with the whole school without crippling them or making them feel inferior. - Putting a child in the best situation to succeed. - Evens the playing field; whatever environment that provides best opportunity possible to be successful. - Service you provide a student that allows them the maximum opportunities for them to be successful with their own limitations. - The placement that allows the child access to the curriculum with the right amount of support.
Special Education Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being able to meet a child's needs as closely to the regular setting as possible. - A lot of people think LRE means being in the mainstream and with typically developing kids as much as possible, but I see it as being where the child has the fewest number of restrictions placed on their ability to grow and learn and that doesn't necessarily mean being with typically developing peers. I think an environment is more restrictive if the kid feels lost and cannot grow. - The least restrictive environment is the environment in which they can learn. - The opportunity for the kids to interact and to receive instruction with non-disabled peers in the environment that is least confining, least stigmatizing . . . we are just trying to define what works for them and sometimes that may take them away from other students they would normally receive instruction with. - It is the place where a student can be most successful and gain the most from education.
General Education Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It's pretty much a positive and consistent environment for a student to learn. It is supposed to be like a support system for that child whatever the reason is . . . academic, aptitude or behavior.

General Education Teachers

- Placing a kid where he can get what he needs academically without being singled out or without being pushed to the point where he gets nothing. It is a tricky balance . . . you have to take into account academics, emotions, all kinds of things.
- It is for a student to come in and it's not . . . it's like a normal type of setting of a classroom as opposed to something more structured like a small group or something like that.
- Where the student is going to be comfortable. Where they are going to have the best experience for them to learn and be the most successful and an opportunity to achieve academically. It's all about what the student needs.
- The place where a student can be most successful. Where they are able to learn and make the most growth whether it is a regular classroom or a small group setting.

APPENDIX K

PERCEIVED ROLES OF IEP TEAM MEMBERS

Role of EC Teacher in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share evaluation and present level of performance; I have a large part. - Advisory role and most of the time people concur with what I say; they do typically go with what the EC Teacher recommends. - Work with a team to develop the most appropriate plan for a student; interpret data and explain how those deficits or skills either enhance or hinder in a gen ed class. - Most people take my lead . . . they take the EC Teacher's lead. My role is also to explain how a student really is verses the teacher's perception of what they are doing and educate teachers about what the rules are. - I am the leader in determining where the child is going to be served because parents are not knowledgeable enough; what I say carries a lot of weight. 	EC Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They should be very involved with the kids and know them well. - They are data gatherers and reporters. I wish they provided more strategies. - They facilitate the meeting and give goals. Determine amount of time they get in EC room. Meets with me before the meeting and fills out the paperwork. - They head up the process and are kind of the supervisor. - EC teacher takes the lead because they are the ones with the real knowledge base. 	General Ed Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They come in from perspective about the law and what's best for the child, - They are extremely important because they spend the most time with the kid and they know more about what the student will need because of their background/education. - Here, EC teachers do give us a chance to voice our opinions which has not always been the case at other places I have been. I have been in some where the EC teacher said here is what we are doing and we sign and that is that. - They should be the one to talk about what he/she will be doing for the student specifically from an EC standpoint. They should make sure the parent has a clear understanding of the terminology. Obviously it is their role to set the meeting up and get everyone to the table. - Share specifically where the holes are that might not be at grade level and how they are working to fill those holes. 	LEA Rep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EC teacher is the main player in the meeting and has more input. - Often times they take the lead and make themselves the authority as to what should be done. A lot of the time they talk over the parent and use a lot of language that the average parent just does not know. They 	Parent

Role of EC Teacher in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<p>facilitate the meeting and tell everyone else pretty much this is what we are doing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The EC teacher usually runs the meetings and sets up the format of the meeting. - The EC teacher had the most impact because they knew him (my son) best. - The special ed teacher's role is to focus on what part of his disability is the worst and improve that for the year and try to get his reading as close to grade level as possible. 	Parent (cont.)
Role of General Ed Teacher in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps give perspective about what's going on in that particular grade level; expectations about procedures or homework. - Rarely say a lot; sometimes complain after the meeting about the decision. - To say how well they are doing now. Are they able to do those things in the classroom . . . see them in a different environment. Sometimes they do not know the kid because they do not teach them. - Helps me understand the curriculum. 	EC Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I speak to academic trends or valleys or spike I see in observations. - I'm part of the committee and do not make the decision in isolation. I talk about what I see in the classroom, but sometimes I do not teach the kid. - They (EC teacher) asks for my opinion about push-in or pull-out; I feel like she values my opinion. - They (EC teachers) ask for my feedback about the student's strengths and weaknesses. Not a huge amount of impact by the general ed teacher in determining where a student should go. - I usually sit back at first and get a feel for the meeting. Have a lot of conversations before we meet with the parent. I give feedback on what I see in the classroom. 	General Ed Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General ed should pick up on any issues in the classroom early on. Sometimes they come with an agenda hoping the kid will not be in their class. - They need to make sure they are aware and understand how to best serve those students. - Hate to say it, but sometimes there is a regular ed teacher who is in the meeting who hasn't had the student, who doesn't really know the student, but are in there because it is during their planning time. - To gain an understanding of the student and share what might and what might not work. - Sharing where the student is in terms of grade level. 	LEA Rep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speak about classroom expectations and field trips and other activities. - The EC teacher says what we will do and the regular ed teacher just follows suit. - They provide a different perspective and about different activities. 	Parent

Role of General Ed Teacher in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The general ed teacher had input about what he (my son) was capable of, or not as the case may be. - To volunteer information about how she feels my child comprehends things in class and how his attention is and how he does in a larger setting. 	Parent (cont.)
Role of LEA Rep in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good at asking questions and making us reconsider things; they guide us. - Goes along with EC teacher. - Go along with recommendations of the EC teacher. - Tell us what resources are available; make sure we are legally responsible; big picture point of view. 	EC Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - See things from big picture; provide discipline and academic options. - Offer guidance, answer administrative type questions; support teachers. - Help case managers make decisions about placement; share things they see in and out of classrooms. - Take a back seat and give input if it is a behavior problem . . . because they have seen the student in the office. 	General Ed Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You have to play the role of surrogate parent and think if this were my child what would I want and what would be best? Sometimes I am a mediator when there is disagreement. - I look over the IEP, facilitate the meeting and make sure we are upholding all legal and ethical aspects of EC. I serve as a go between for parents and the EC Staff. - I provide perspective because I move around and see kids in different settings and see how they are working – lots of informal evaluations. - To keep us legal as a representative of the education agency and to say we cannot do that or we can do that. I ask for student input. I think my role is also to help make sure the parents and student understands what is being talked about. - Making sure that our master schedule is constructed in a way that allows for flexibility so students get what they need and still get core instruction. Sometimes I am the liaison between the school and the family and visit them at home before or after the meeting to make sure they understand. Of course, making sure we are adhering to the laws as a school. Making sure we are not making a lot of decisions before the meeting. 	LEA Rep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has a lot to say about big picture. - They should have all the information to discuss a student at the meeting. Don't be in the meeting if you do not know my kid. Get some background information. Tell me, why are you in here? What did you bring in here? Other than the fact that you need to sign this paper. Because, I don't want to sit in here and talk to you if you don't have something to say. 	Parent

Role of LEA Rep in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They keep everybody in line. Our principal is all over the school and gets a lot of information about the students from different teachers. - Sometimes the principal had input because they got to know him. Partly because of his behavior problems and partly because he is such a fun kid to know. - They are there because they have to be. I mean, they are very supportive . . . but I think it is because they trust their teachers so much and they rely on their teachers to know what they are talking about. 	Parent (cont.)
Role of Parent in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present their vision for their kid; how they see their kid and what their hopes are for their child; sometimes they don't see their child as a student but only from a parent's heart. - Should advocate for their child (said by all four EC Teachers) 	EC Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wish they were more of an advocate. Most come in and sign whatever is in front of them and have no idea what they are doing . . . I think it is very much a socioeconomic thing and not knowing what to ask or what their rights are. - To share hopes and dreams about their children. - They bring their own input to the meeting about what their child should and should not be doing. - They are going to be their kids biggest advocate. 	General Ed Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If they are educated they come to the table with their opinion and will go against the general ed teacher and the principal a lot of times. - They are important because we need them to understand that the things we are doing for their children are in the best interest of them and their child. We need their support. - Either extremely involved or just nods their heads and sign. - Their role is to advocate for their child. - They are there to be an advocate for their child and I do encourage that and for parents to ask questions and to be vocal if they are not happy. 	LEA Rep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To push more . . . don't want to say push, maybe I was proactive in asking for her to be in inclusive settings. Also, I have to realize that just because I might want her to be in this setting that may not be where she needs to be and I need to open to what the team has to share as well. - I never had an issue with the least restrictive environment because all of my children have been in the regular education classes. They also had resource time but it was never an issue for us. I feel I have a big role. In our school any questions from any part of the team be it a teacher or parent . . . everybody has voices. No one person has made a decision without the whole team being involved. - I felt like they were a team and I just came in. I was just present by law because they had to invite me. I did not feel like part of the team. I ruffled a few feathers because I asked questions about different things like how you derived to that. I still don't know how they derived at the minutes of service time. 	Parent

Role of Parent in IEP Meeting	As perceived by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- I always wanted their input because I knew they knew more than I did educationally as far as how to place and serve him. I did advocate for him to get a one-on-one.- My role is that THEY are the professionals. I trust what they tell me because it has worked so far. I have asked for more time in the special ed room because I think it would be better . . . but I know we cannot do that.	Parent (cont.)

APPENDIX L

ACADEMIC SKILLS AND LRE DETERMINATION

EC Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If he is two years behind grade level then we may want to consider pulling out so we can really focus on specific needs. However, if he can already access a lot of the grade level material or even on one year earlier grade level material we might just have a few holes we can go in and support in the regular classroom. - The further they are from grade level the less likely it is that they will spend a significant portion of their day in the regular ed classroom because they will need to close those gaps. - They need to have enough reading skills to read the text they are presented with or at least accommodations where they can access it. - They need the basic reading and math calculation skills, but the student would also need to be able to comply and work hard. - He can answer grade level question and do grade level content. He can pretty much do whatever we ask.
Regular Ed Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They should be able to do the work independently or in a small group pulled to the side. If they cannot do the work or if we cannot modify our lessons and assignments to the point where they can then we probably need to explore other things . . . need to be able to read and write at some level. Really the biggest thing is they just have to want to try. - They have to have at least over 60% of success in the classroom including instructional time and partner time and they have to be able to hit lesson design areas to be able to do it. - I don't know how to phrase it into something academic. To be in a regular classroom they have to be a self-starter . . . and not need someone standing over you all of the time because it is just not possible. - Just because a student might not be on grade level I don't automatically think he needs an IEP . . . but, I would say if a student is in second grade and working on pre-K skills they need to be pulled out of the classroom and working with an EC teacher. - They have to have the ability to access the curriculum at a meaningful level . . . and to understand the academic language that we use in classes.

Principals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If a kid has the desire to learn it doesn't matter where they are taught because the adult has to have the patience to teach. - As a rule of thumb if they are no more than three grade levels behind we let them be in the general ed program . . . physical disabilities, like students in a wheelchair is separate from intellectual. They may have a physical disability but that does not mean they have a cognitive disabilities - The biggest thing is their reading level. If they can read at level and understand what they are reading it makes the biggest difference . . . especially with all for the standardized tests that we have and the unique vocabulary in all subjects. - No, there are not academic skill requirements to be in the regular education classroom because all of our kids come in . . . I mean . . . if you have 25 kids in your classroom you have 25 kids at 25 different levels. It's more about did we meet the student where they are take this student from where they were and grow them. - I don't think they have to have certain academics skills . . . we have students who are not EC with lower scores than kids who are.
Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I knew she needed to be able to function at a certain level academically to function in those classrooms. I wouldn't expect them to do a whole completely different lesson just so I could say she is in the regular classroom. If it could be modified and she could benefit academically then ok. I don't want her to be in the regular classroom if she is not benefitting just so I can say she is in the regular ed classroom. - If they are not a certain level or have not reached a certain spot with all the stages they go through or whatever . . . ultimately what to they do? They go to special ed. - Even though they might be in third grade and are not reading on third-grade level, why should they be taken out of that class during that reading section and secluded away from his or her peers? If a child cannot do math to the level that the class is doing it, but still does math there should be a time when they are pulled out to get help with their math, but they should still be there to see what regular class is. That's the tricky part . . . getting it worked out so they don't miss anything. - They would need to read on a certain level, absolutely. Read and write on a certain level. Math skills are necessary too. - I think academic skills do matter and I think that is a beneficial thing because you do need to recognize that children learn differently in different settings. If I could have him in small classes all day long I would. I think he learns better in small classes because his focus is better.